

George Manville Fenn

"A Life's Eclipse"

Chapter One.

"What insolence!"

John Grange's brown, good-looking face turned of a reddish-brown in the cheeks, the warm tint mounting into his forehead, as he looked straight in the speaker's eyes, and there was a good, manly English ring in his voice as he said sturdily—

"I didn't know, Mr Ellis, that it was insolent for a man to come in a straightforward way, and say to the father of the young lady simply—yes, and humbly—'I love your daughter, sir.'"

"But it is, sir, downright insolence. Recollect what you are, sir, only an under-gardener living at the bothy on thirty shillings a week."

"I do recollect it, sir, but I don't mean to be an under-gardener always."

"Oh, indeed," said James Ellis sarcastically, "but poor old Dunton is not dead yet, and when he does die, Mrs Mostyn is quite as likely to appoint Daniel Barnett to his place as you, and if she takes my advice, she'll give the post to neither of you, but get some able, sensible man from Chiswick."

"But, Mr Ellis—"

"That will do, John Grange," said the owner of that name pompously. "I know what you are going to say. I am not ashamed of having been only a gardener once, but I am Mrs Mostyn's bailiff and agent now, sir, and, so to speak, your master. Let me hear no more of this nonsense, sir. That will do. But one moment. Have you had the—I mean, does Mary—I mean, does Miss Ellis know that you were going to speak to me this evening?"

"No, sir," said John Grange sternly. "I'm only an under-gardener, but I've heard that it was the proper thing to speak out openly first."

"Then Mary does not know that you—I mean, that you think about her?"

"I hope and believe she does; sir," said the young man warmly, and his eyes flashed, and a proud, joyful look came into his countenance.

"Then I beg you will not hope and believe anything of the kind, sir, again. My daughter will do precisely as I wish, and when I part with her, it will be to see her go to a substantial home. Good-evening!"

James Ellis tucked his walking-stick under his arm, took off his grey felt hat, drew a red silk handkerchief from the crown, rubbed his bald head, and made himself look hotter as he strode away, while after standing and watching him go toward the bailiff's cottage just outside the park fence at The Hollows on the hill slope, a quarter of a mile away, the young man uttered a sigh and turned in at an open doorway in a high wall, whose top was fringed with young shoots of peaches, nectarines, and apricots, suggestive of the horticultural treasures within.

"What a slap in the face!" he muttered. "Under-gardener! Well, that's all right. Give poor old Dunton's place to Dan Barnett! Here, I can't go in now, I must walk this off."

John Grange pulled the open door to, so that it fastened with a snap, and turned off to make for the woods, where he could think alone.

His way was for a couple of hundred yards toward the pretty villa known as the bailiff's cottage, and he had not gone half that distance when a sudden pang shot through him. For the place stood high, and he caught sight of two figures in the garden, one that of a man, the other that of some one in white muslin and a straw hat, coming toward the gate. The next minute the man was in the road, and half a minute later he was standing talking to Mrs Mostyn's agent, while the white muslin that had been so plainly seen amongst the shrubs had disappeared into the cottage.

John Grange's face grew dark with a look of despair, and he did not go off into the woods.

Dan Barnett, up there at the cottage talking to Mary, while he had been speaking to her father, and she had come down to the gate with her visitor.

Something very like a groan escaped the young man's lips as he crossed the road to lean his arms upon the gate, and looked over into the park, feeling more miserable than ever before in his life.

"I'm a poor, weak fool," he thought. "He's good-looking, and knows the way to a girl's heart. Better keep to my nailing and pruning. One from the father, two from Dan Barnett. Regular knock-down blows. Better get up again, go to work and forget it all—if I can."

"Nice evening, John Grange. Drop o' rain coming?"

"Eh? Yes, I think so, Tummus," said the young man, turning to the dry, quaint old fellow who had spoken, and who now screwed up the bark on his face—it more resembled that than skin—showed three or four ancient, yellow teeth, and jerked his right thumb over his shoulder.

"I say—see that? Young Dan Barnett going courtin', and now having it out with Miss Mary's dad. You mark my words, Mr John, sir, if poor old Dunton dies, and Dan Barnett steps into his shoes, there'll be a wedding yonder."

"Think so, Tummus?" said John Grange, with a forced smile.

"Aye, that's what I think, sir," said the old man, and then showing his gums as well as his teeth, he continued, "and I thinks this 'ere too—that if I'd been a young, good-looking chap like some one I know, I wouldn't ha' let Dan Barnett shoulder me out, and stand in first with the prettiest and best young lady in these parts. Evening!"

"Here, hi! You!" came from behind them, and the person in question strode up, looking frowning and angry.

"You ca' me, Mr Dan?"

"Yes; did you finish wheeling up that stuff?"

"Aye; I fished it all 'fore I left work. Good-evening."

He left the two young men standing together, and there was a peculiar, malicious look in the fresh-comer's eyes as he gave John Grange a short nod.

"Mrs Mostyn say anything to you 'bout the cedar?"

"Yes; she said the broken stump was to be cut off to-morrow."

"Then you'd better get the ladders and ropes ready first thing."

"You mean we had better," said John Grange quietly.

"No, I don't. I'm not going to break my neck for thirty shillings a week. Heard how Dunton is?"

"Very bad. Doctor Manning was here again this evening."

"Well, he's nearly ninety—a man can't expect to live for ever. Time he did go."

John Grange walked away toward the head-gardener's cottage to ask for the last news, and Daniel Barnett stood watching him with a frown on his rather handsome features.

"Poor old Dunton!" said John Grange to himself; "we shall miss him when he's gone."

"Hang him!" muttered Barnett, "that's it. I saw him talking to the old man, but he hasn't won yet. Insolence, eh? I like that. The Barnetts are as good as the Ellis's, anyhow. Wait a bit, my lady, and I may take a bit of the pride out of you."

Some men have a habit of thinking across the grain.

Chapter Two.

At seven o'clock next morning John Grange felt better when he stood with Daniel Barnett, old Tummus, and Mary Ellis's father at the foot of the great cedar facing the house, a tree sadly shorn of its beauty by a sudden squall that had swept down the valley, and snapped off the top, where an ugly stump now stood out forty feet from the lawn.

Grange felt better, for in spite of his hectoring, triumphant manner, it was plain to see that Daniel Barnett had not sped well with Mary's father, whatever might have been his success with the lady herself.

James Ellis was no longer young, and early work before breakfast had grown distasteful; still, he had come to see the broken stump sawn off.

The ladder had been raised, and got into position, but it was too short by ten feet, and there was an awkward climb before the man who went up could use the saw or attach the rope to keep the sawn-off stump from falling with a crash.

"Well," said Ellis, "what are we waiting for?"

Old Tummus chuckled.

"Why when I first come to these here gardens five-and-forty years ago, I'd ha' gone up there like a squirrel, Mr Ellis, sir; but these here fine new-fangled gardeners can't do as we did."

"Better go up now," said Barnett.

"Nay, nay, my lad, sixty-eight's a bit too ripe for climbing trees, eh, Master Ellis?"

"Yes, of course," said the bailiff. "Come, get it done."

"Do you hear, John Grange?" said Barnett. "Up with you. Better hitch the rope under that big bough, and saw the next. Make it well fast before you begin to saw."

"I thought Mrs Mostyn told you to go up and cut it?" said Ellis pompously; "and I heard you tell her how you should do it?"

"Or have it done, sir. Here, up with you, John."

John Grange felt annoyed at the other's manner in the presence of the bailiff. There was a tone—a hectoring way—which nettled him the more that they were precisely equal in status at the great gardens; and, besides, there were Mary and old Tummus's words. He had, he knew, let this rather overbearing fellow-servant step in front of him again and again, and this morning he felt ready to resent it, as the blood came into his cheeks.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" cried Barnett. "Up with you!"

"If it was your orders, why don't you go?" retorted Grange.

Barnett burst into a hoarse fit of laughter, and turned to the bailiff.

"Hear that, sir? He's afraid. Ha-ha-ha! Well, well! I did think he had some pluck."

"Perhaps I have pluck enough," said the young man, "even if it is an awkward job, but I don't see why I'm to be bullied into doing your work."

"I thought so," continued Barnett, "white feather! Talk away, John, you can't hide it now."

Old Tummus showed his yellow stumps.

"He can't do it, Mr Dan," he chuckled. "You're the chap to go up. You show him how to do it."

"You hold your tongue. Speak when you're spoken to," said Barnett fiercely; and the old man chuckled the more as Barnett turned to John Grange.

"Now then, are you afraid to go up? Because if so, say so, and I'll do it."

John Grange glanced at the bailiff, and then stooped and picked up the coil of rope, passed it over his shoulder, and then seized the saw. He mounted the ladder, and clinging to the tree, stood on the last round, and then climbing actively, mounted the remaining ten feet to where he could stand upon a branch and attach the rope to the stump, pass the end over a higher bough and lower it down to the others. Then rolling his sleeves right up to the shoulder, he began to cut, the keen teeth of the saw biting into the soft, mahogany-like wood, and sending down the dust like sleet.

It was a good half-hour's task to cut it through, but the sturdy young fellow worked away till only a cut or two more was necessary, and then he stopped.

"Ready below?" he said, glancing down.

"All right!" cried Ellis. "Cut clean through, so that it does not splinter."

"Yes, sir," shouted Grange; and he was giving the final cuts, when for some reason, possibly to get the rope a little farther along, Barnett gave it a sharp jerk, with the effect that the nearly free piece of timber gave way with a sharp crash, just as John Grange was reaching out to give the last cut.

Cedar snaps like glass. Down went the block with a crash to the extent the rope would allow, and there swung like a pendulum.

Down, too, went Grange, overbalanced.

He dropped the saw, and made a desperate snatch at a bough in front, and he caught it, and hung in a most precarious way for a few moments.

"Quick!" he shouted to Barnett; "the ladder!"

Ellis and old Tummus held the rope, not daring to let go and bring the piece of timber crashing down. Barnett alone was at liberty to move the ladder; and he stood staring up, as if paralysed by the danger and by the thought that the man above him was his rival, for whose sake he had been, only a few hours before, refused.

But it was only a matter of seconds.

John Grange's fingers were already gliding over the rough bark; and before Barnett could throw off the horrible mental chains which bound him, the young man uttered a low, hoarse cry, and fell headlong through the air.

Chapter Three.

"How do you say it happened?"

Old Tummus was riding in the doctor's gig back to The Hollows after running across to the village for help; and he now repeated all he knew, with the additions of sundry remarks about these new-fangled young "harticult'ral gardeners who know'd everything but their work."

"Come right down on his head, poor lad," he said; "but you'll do your best for him, doctor: don't you let him slip through your fingers."

The doctor smiled grimly, and soon after drew up at the door in the garden wall, and hurried through to the bothy where John Grange had been carried and lay perfectly insensible, with Mrs Mostyn, a dignified elderly widow lady, who had hurried out as soon as she had heard of the accident, bathing his head, and who now anxiously waited till the doctor's examination was at an end.

"Well, doctor," said Mrs Mostyn eagerly, "don't keep me in suspense."

"I must," he replied gravely. "It will be some time before I can say anything definite. I feared fractured skull, but there are no bones broken."

"Thank heaven!" said Mrs Mostyn piously. "Such a frank, promising young man—such an admirable florist. Then he is not going to be very bad?"

"I cannot tell yet. He is perfectly insensible, and in all probability he will suffer from the concussion to the brain, and spinal injury be the result."

"Oh, doctor, I would have given anything sooner than this terrible accident should have occurred. Pray forgive me—would you like assistance?"

"Yes: of a good nurse. If complications arise, I will suggest the sending for some eminent man."

Many hours elapsed before John Grange opened his eyes from what seemed to be a deep sleep; and then he only muttered incoherently, and old Tummus's plump, elderly wife, who was famed in the district for her nursing qualities, sat by the bedside and shed tears as she held his hand.

"Such a bonny lad," she said, "I wonder what Miss Mary'll say if he should die."

Mary had heard the news at breakfast-time before her father had returned, but she made no sign, only looked very pale and grave. And as she dwelt upon the news she wondered what she would have said if John Grange had come to her and spoken as Daniel Barnett did on the previous evening.

This thought made the colour come back to her cheeks and a strange fluttering to her breast as she recalled the different times they had met, and John Grange's tenderly respectful way towards her.

Then she chased away her thoughts, for her mother announced from the window that "father" was coming.

A minute later James Ellis entered, to sit down sadly to his breakfast, his silence being respected by mother and daughter.

At last he spoke.

"You heard, of course, about poor Grange?"

"Yes. How is he?"

"Bad—very bad. Doctor don't say much, but it's a serious case, I fear. Come right down on his head, close to my feet. There—I can't eat. Only fancy, mother, talking to me as he was last night, and now lying almost at the point of death."

He pushed away cup and plate, and sat back in his chair.

"In the midst of life we are in death," he muttered. "Dear, dear, I wish I hadn't spoken so harshly to him last night, mother. Fine, straightforward young fellow, and as good a gardener as ever stepped."

Mrs Ellis sighed and glanced at her daughter, who was looking wildly from one to the other.

"There; I'll get back. Ah! Who's this?"

It was Daniel Barnett, who had run up from the bothy; and Ellis hurried out to the door.

"What is it?" he cried anxiously.

"Old Hannah says, 'Will you come on:.' She don't like the looks of him. He's off his head."

Ellis caught his hat from the peg, and glanced at Daniel Barnett with a peculiar thought or two in his head as the young man looked quickly at the door and window.

Barnett caught the glance and felt uncomfortable, for though sorry for his fellow-worker's accident, certain thoughts would intrude relating to his own prospects if John Grange were not at The Hollows.

They hurried down to the grounds, mother and daughter watching from the window, and in those few minutes a great change came over Mary Ellis's face. It was as if it rapidly altered from that of the happy, careless girl, who went singing about the house, to the thoughtful, anxious woman. Even her way of speaking was different, as she turned quickly upon her mother.

"What was father so angry about last night?" she said. "Did he have a quarrel with poor Mr Grange?"

"Well, hardly a quarrel, my dear. Oh, it was nothing."

"But he said he was sorry he spoke so harshly to him. Mother, you are keeping something back."

"Well, well, well, my darling, nothing much; only young men will be young men; and father was put out by his vanity and conceit. He actually got talking to father about you."

"About me?" said Mary, flushing, and beginning to tremble.

"Yes, my dear; and, as father said, it was nothing short of impudence for a young man in his position to think about you. I don't know what's come to the young men now-a-days, I'm sure."

Mary said nothing, but she was very thoughtful all that day, and during the days which followed, for she had found out the truth about herself, and a little germ that had been growing in her breast, but of which she had thought little till Daniel Barnett came up and spoke, and made her know she had a heart—a fact of which she became perfectly sure, when the news reached her next morning of the sad accident in the grounds.

Chapter Four.

Old Hannah's fears were needless, for the delirium passed away; and as the days glided by and poor Grange lay in his darkened bedroom, untiringly watched by old Tummus's patient wife, James Ellis used to take the tidings home till the day when in secret Mary went up afterwards to her own room to sink upon her knees by her bedside, and hide her burning face in her hands, as if guiltily, while she offered up her prayer and thanksgiving for all that she had heard.

For the doctor had definitely said that John Grange would not die from the effects of his fall.

"Thank you, Tummus, old man," said the patient, one evening about a fortnight after the accident; and he took a bunch of roses in his hand. "I can't see them, but they smell deliciously.

Hah! How it makes me long to be back again among the dear old flowers."

"Aye, to be sure, my lad. You mun mak' haste and get well and get out to us again. Dan Barnett arn't half the man you are among the missus's orchardses. And look here, I want my old woman home again. You mun look sharp and get well."

"Yes: I hope the doctor will soon let me get up. God bless you, Hannah! You've been quite like a mother to me."

"Nonsense, nonsense, boy; only a bit o' nussing. Make haste and get well again."

"Aye, she'd be a good nuss if she warn't quite so fond o' mustard," said old Tummus. "It's allus mustard, mustard, stuck about you to pingle and sting if there's owt the matter. I like my mustard on my beef. And that's what you want, Master John—some good slices o' beef. They women's never happy wi'out giving you spoon meat."

"Hold your tongue, Tummus, and don't talk so much nonsense," said his wife.

"Nay, I arn't going to be choked. I s'pose Mrs Mostyn sends you jellies and chicken-broth, and the like?"

"Yes, every one is very kind," said Grange. "But look here, have you seen to the mushroom bed?"

"Aye."

"And those cuttings in the frames?"

"You mak' haste and get well, Master John, and don't you worry about nowt. I'm seeing to everything quite proper, for I don't trust Master Dan Barnett a bit. He's thinking too much o' finding scuses to go up to the cottage, and I know why. There, good-night. Get well, lad. I do want to see that bandage from over your eyes next time I come. Old Dunton's mortal bad, they say. Good-night."

It was a bad night for John Grange, who was so feverish that the doctor remarked upon it, and the progress was so poor during the next week that the doctor determined to have his patient up, and came one morning in company with the bailiff, talking to him seriously the while.

They were very kind to him, helping him to dress, and helped him at last into the outer room, where it was light and cool, and old Hannah, with a face full of commiseration, had placed an easy-chair for the pale, weak man, with his eyes and head bandaged heavily.

It so happened that just as John Grange lay back in the chair, while old Hannah stood with her handkerchief to her eyes, crying silently, and James Ellis was behind the chair looking very grave and stern, Daniel Barnett came up to the door of the bothy with a message, which he did not deliver, for the words he heard arrested him, and he drew back listening.

"Now, doctor, please," sighed Grange; "it has been so hard to bear all this long time, and I have been very patient. Let me have the bandage off, and, if it's only a glimpse, one look at the bright sunshine again."

There was silence for a moment, and then the doctor took the young man's hand, his voice shaking a little, as he said gravely—

"Grange, my lad, three weeks ago I felt that I could not save your life. God has heard our prayers, and let my poor skill avail. You will in a few weeks be as strong as ever."

"Yes—yes," said the patient, in tones of humble thankfulness, and then his lips moved for a few moments, but no sound was heard. Then aloud—"Believe me, doctor, I am grateful. But the bandage. Let me see the light."

"My poor fellow!" began the doctor, and old Hannah uttered a sob, "you must know."

"Ah!" cried John Grange, snatching the bandage from his eyes, the broad handkerchief kept there ever since the fall. "Don't—don't tell me that—I—I was afraid—yes—dark—all dark! Doctor—doctor—don't tell me I am blind!"

Old Hannah's sobs grew piteous, and in the silence which followed, James Ellis stole on tiptoe towards the window, unable to be a witness of the agony which convulsed the young man's face.

"Then it is true!" said Grange. "Blind—blind from that awful shock."

"Ah, here you are, Master Barnett," cried the voice of old Tummus outside. "The doctor. Is he coming over? 'Cause he needn't now."

"What is the matter?" said Ellis, stepping out, with Daniel Barnett backing away from the porch before him.

"Poor owd Dunton's gone, sir; dropped off dead ripe at last—just gone to sleep."

James Ellis looked Daniel Barnett in the eyes, and both had the same thought in their minds.

What a change in the younger man's prospects this last stroke of fate had made!

Chapter Five.

"I am very deeply grieved, Mr Manning," said Mrs Mostyn, as she sat in her drawing-room, holding a kind of consultation with the doctor and James Ellis, her old agent, and as she spoke, the truth of her words was very evident, for she kept applying her handkerchief to her eyes. "I liked John Grange. A frank, manly fellow, whose heart was in his work, and I fully intended, Ellis, that he should succeed poor old Dunton."

"Yes, ma'am; a most worthy young man," said the bailiff.

"Worthy? He was more than that. He was fond of his work and proud of the garden. Go in that conservatory, doctor, and look at my orchids. His skill was beyond question."

"Your flowers are the envy of the county, Mrs Mostyn," said the doctor.

"Ah, well! It is not my flowers in question, but this poor fellow's future. Do you mean to tell me that you can do nothing for him?"

"I regret to say that I must," said the doctor gravely. "We try all we can to master Nature's mechanism, but I frankly confess that we are often very helpless. In this case the terrible shock of the fall on the head seems to have paralysed certain optical nerves. Time may work wonders, but I fear that his sight is permanently destroyed."

"Oh, dear, dear, dear!" sighed Mrs Mostyn, down whose pleasant old face the tears now coursed unchecked; "and all to satisfy my whims—all because I objected to a ragged, broken branch. But, doctor, can nothing be done?"

"I can only recommend one thing, madam—that he should go up to one of the specialists, who will suggest that he should stay in his private infirmary."

"Well, why not?" said Mrs Mostyn eagerly.

"There is the expense, madam," said the doctor hesitatingly.

"Expense? Pooh! Fudge! People say I am very mean. Poor old Dunton used to say so, and James Ellis here."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am—" began the bailiff.

"Oh, don't deny it, James; you know you have. I heard of it over and over again, because I would not agree to some extravagant folly proposed by you or poor old Dunton for the estate or garden."

"But—"

"Silence! I remember Dunton said I could spend hundreds on new orchids, and stinted him in help; and you were quite angry because I wouldn't have half-a-mile of new park palings, when the old mossy ones look lovely. But I'm not mean, doctor, when there is a proper need for outlay. Now you go at once and make arrangements for that poor young man to be taken up to town and placed in this institution. Mind, you are to spare no expense. It was my fault that poor Grange lost his sight, and I shall never love my garden again if his eyes are not restored."

The doctor rose, shook hands, and went away, leaving the bailiff with his mistress, who turned to him with her brow all in puckers.

"Well, James Ellis, I hardly know what to say. It is a dreadful shock, and I don't like to do anything hastily. If there was a prospect of poor Grange recovering I would wait."

The bailiff shook his head.

"Doctor Manning told me, ma'am, that he was afraid it was hopeless."

"And I'm afraid so too," said Mrs Mostyn, with a sigh.

"I can't superintend the garden myself, ma'am."

"No, Ellis, you have too much to do."

"And gardens are gardens, ma'am—ours in particular."

"Yes," said Mrs Mostyn, who was thinking of the poor fellow lying at the bothy in darkness.

"And with all those glass-houses and their valuable contents, a day's neglect is never recovered."

"No, James Ellis."

"The men, too, want some one over them whom they must obey."

"Of course—of course, Ellis. And you think Daniel Barnett is quite equal to the duties?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. He is quite as good a gardener as John Grange, so I don't think you could do better, ma'am. You see we know him, that he is trustworthy and clever."

"Well, well, I'll think about it. I will not decide this morning; but I suppose it will have to be so. I can't go appointing another man directly the breath is out of poor old Dunton's body, and with that poor fellow lying there in misery. Come to me this day week, James Ellis, and I will give my decision."

The bailiff bowed and withdrew, to go straight to the gardens, where, quite by accident, of course, Daniel Barnett came along one of the paths, and met him, looking at him inquiringly; but Ellis did not say a word about the subject nearest then to the young man's heart. He asked how the grapes were looking, and had a peep at them and the melons. Then went on through the orchid-houses, reeking with heat and moisture, and at last stood still wiping his head in the hot sunshine.

"They do you credit, Barnett," he said. "I'm very glad to see how you have thrown yourself into the gap, and managed now poor John Grange is down; everything looks perfect. I see you have kept the men up to their work."

"Done my best, Mr Ellis, of course," said the young man.

"Of course, of course. I told Mrs Mostyn I was sure you would. There, I must be off. Good-morning."

He started off for the gate, and then turned.

"Oh, by the way, Barnett, poor John Grange is to be sent up to town. I thought you would like to hear. But don't say a word to him, and—er—I'm always at home of an evening if you care to step up and have a quiet pipe with me, and a bit of music before supper. Good-morning."

"The wind's changed," said Dan Barnett, with his face flushed up by the exultation he felt. "I'm safe two ways. Poor old Jack Grange! Well, we can't all win."

Chapter Six.

The week, had passed, and Daniel Barnett had been up to the cottage twice while John Grange lay in the dark. The welcome had been warm enough from James Ellis; Mrs Ellis had been lukewarm and wary.

"Ah, well, that will come," said the young man to himself on the previous evening, after he had received his instructions from the bailiff about the fly to the station, and his duties in taking charge of John Grange, and going up with him to the little private infirmary where he was to stay for a few months if necessary. "Poor chap! I'm sorry for him, but, as I said before, we can't all win."

The day for John Grange's departure had come, and he lay back upon a little couch fighting hard to bear his misfortune like a man, and think hopefully of his future. Mrs Mostyn had been to see him four times, and spoke in the most motherly way as she prophesied a successful issue to the journey; but only left him more low-spirited as he thought of Mary and his and her future.

The couch was close to the open window, where he could feel the warm sunshine, and old Hannah had left him for a short time alone to go and finish packing his little bag, while Daniel Barnett in his best was waiting to see James Ellis, when he came from the house, receive his final instructions, and then have the fly brought to the garden-door for John Grange.

He had quite half-an-hour to wait before Ellis appeared, and on joining him held out his hand.

"Good-bye, sir," said Barnett, "but I shall see you at the bothy. I'll take great care of the poor fellow."

"I meant to congratulate you, Dan Barnett, our new head-gardener," said Ellis. "Mrs Mostyn confirms your appointment. Success to you! Now come on to the bothy, and let's get that poor fellow off. I'll let him know of it by and by—not for a week or two yet."

But John Grange, as he lay there, was feeling sure that the appointment would be given to Barnett, and he only sighed in a hopeless way, and felt that it was just. And just then he heard a step and pulled himself together.

"Come in," he said, trying to speak cheerily. "No mistaking your fairy footsteps, Tummus. I thought you'd come and say good-bye."

"Aye, and come to the station too, my lad. And I mean to come up to the orspittle once a week, to bring you a bit o' fruit and a few flowers, if I have to walk."

"Thank you, old man; thank you."

"You need a bit o' comfort, my lad, and I want you to get right. That old 'ooman's drying hersen up wi' crying about you. There wean't be a drop o' mysture left in her by and by. Ah! It's a strange world."

"It never felt so beautiful before, old man," said John Grange sadly.

"Thought I'd try and comfort you up a bit. S'pose you know that Dan Barnett's safe to be the new head?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Tummus."

"Yah! Means ruins to the grand old place."

"Nonsense! Dan is a thoroughly good gardener when he likes."

"Aye, when he likes," said the old man; and he suddenly subsided into silence, which lasted some minutes, during which John Grange was very thoughtful. Then, suddenly starting, the invalid said—

"There, old fellow, don't run down a good man. It was to be."

There was a deep sigh.

"Don't do that, old chap," said John. "It isn't cheering. I don't mind it so very much. But you must go now; I want to think a bit before they fetch me. Good-bye, and thank you and your dear old wife for all she has done. It's no use to fight against it, old man; I'm going to be always in the dark, I know well enough, so you may as well try and train up some dog to lead me about when I come back, for Heaven only knows what's to become of me. But there, say good-bye. My old mother shan't have taught me to kneel down and say every night, 'thy will be done!' for nothing. There—shake hands and go," he said, trying to command his trembling voice—"before I break down and cry like a girl, just when I want to act the man."

He stretched out his hand again, and it closed, but not upon old Tummus's horny palm, but ringers that were soft and warm, and clung to his; and as that little, soft, trembling hand seemed to nestle there, John Grange uttered a hoarse cry.

"Who—who is this?" he whispered then.

For answer there was a quick, rustling sound, as of some one kneeling down by the couch, and then there was wild sobbing and panting as a soft, wet cheek was laid against his hands.

"Miss Ellis—Mary!" he cried wildly; and the answer came at once.

"Oh, John, John, I could not bear it—I could not let you go without one word."

Chapter Seven.

In those few joyous moments the darkness became light, dazzling light, to John Grange; misery, despair, the blank life before him, had dropped away, and the future spread out in a vista wherein hope shone brightly, and all was illumined by the sweet love of a true-hearted woman.

He would have been less than man if he had not drawn the half-shrinking, half-yielding figure to his heart, and held Mary tightly there as, amidst tears and sobs, she confessed how she had

long felt that he loved her, but doubted herself the reality of the new sensation which had made her pleased to see him, while when she met him as they spoke something seemed to urge her to avoid him, and look hard, distant, and cold. Then the terrible misfortune had come, and she knew the truth; the bud grew and had opened, and she trembled lest any one should divine her secret, till she knew that he was to go away believing that she might care for Daniel Barnett; in suffering and mental pain, needing all that those who cared for him could do to soften his pitiable case; and at last, believing that she alone could send him away hopeful and patient to bear his awful infirmity, she had cast off all reserve and come to say good-bye.

"And you will not think the less of me?" she whispered appealingly.

"Think the less of you!" he cried proudly; "how can you ask that? Mary, you send me away happy. I shall go patient and hopeful, believing that the doctors can and will give me back my sight, and ready to wait till I may come back to you, my own love—for I do love you, dear. This year past my every thought has been of you, and I have worked and studied to make myself worthy, but always in despair, for I felt that you could not care for one like me, and that—"

"How could you think it?" she whispered tenderly, as she nestled to him. "I never, never could have cared for him, John, nor for any one but you."

And for those brief minutes all was the brightest of life's sunshine in that humble room. There were tears in Mary's sweet grey eyes, and they clung upon the lashes and lay wet upon her cheeks; but that sunshine made them flash irradiant with joy before the black cloud closed in again, and John Grange's pale face grew convulsed with agony, as he shrank from her, only holding her hands in his with a painful clasp; while, as she gazed at him wildly, startled by the change, she saw that his eyes seemed to be staring wildly at her, so bright, unchanged, and keen that it was impossible to believe that they were blank, so plainly did they bespeak the agony and despair in the poor fellow's breast.

"John," she cried excitedly, "what is it? Shall I go for help? You are in terrible pain?"

"Yes, yes, dear," he moaned; "pain so great that it is more than I can bear. No, no, don't go, not for a minute, dear; but go

then, never to come near me more. Don't, don't tempt me. God help me and give me strength."

"John, dear," he whispered piteously, as she clung to his hands, and he felt her press towards him till the throbbings of her heart beat upon his wrists.

"No, no," he groaned. "Mary, dear, let me tell you while I have strength. I should be no man if I was silent now. I shouldn't be worthy of you, dear, nor of the love you have shown me you could have given."

"John, John!"

"Don't, don't speak to me like that," he groaned, "or you will make me forget once more, and speak to you as I did just now. I was half mad with joy, beside myself with the sweet delight. But 'tis taking a coward's, a cruel advantage of you in your innocence and love. Mary, Mary dear," he said faintly; and could those eyes which stared so blankly towards her have seen, he would have gazed upon the calm, patient face, upon which slowly dawned a gentle tenderness, as she bent lower and lower as if longing to kiss his hands, which she caressed with her warm breath, while she listened to his words.

"Listen, dear," he said, "and let me tell you the truth before you say good-bye, and go back to pray for me—for your own dear self—that we may be patient and bear it. Time will make it easier, and by and by we can look back upon all this as something that might have been."

"Yes," she said gently, and she raised her face a little as she knelt by the couch to gaze fondly in his eyes.

"I am going away, dear, and it is best, for what we have said must be like a dream. Mary, dear, you will not forget me, but you must think of me as a poor brother smitten with this affliction, one, dear, that I have to bear patiently to the end."

"Yes, John," she said, with a strange calmness in her tones.

"How could I let you tie yourself down to a poor helpless wretch who will always be dependent upon others for help? It would be a death in life for you, Mary. In my great joy I forgot it all; but my reason has come back. There is no hope, dear. I am going up to town because Mrs Mostyn wishes it. Heaven bless her for a good, true woman! But it is of no use, I know. Doctor Manning

knows it well enough. My sight has gone, dear, and I must face the future like a man. You well know I am speaking the truth."

She tried to reply, but there was a suffocating sensation at her throat, and it was some moments before she could wildly gasp out—"Yes!"

Then the strange, sweet, patient look of calm came back, with the gentle pity and resignation in her eyes as she gazed at him with sorrow.

"There," he said, "you must go now. Bless you, Mary—bless you, dear. You have sent gladness and a spirit of hopefulness into my dark heart, and I am going away ready to bear it all manfully, for I know it will be easier to bear—by and by—when I get well and strong. Then you shall hear how patient I am, and some day in the future I shall be pleased in hearing, dear, that you are happy with some good, honest fellow who loves and deserves you; and perhaps too," he continued, talking quickly and with a smile upon his lip, as he tried to speak cheerfully in his great desire to lessen her grief and send her away suffering less keenly—"perhaps too, some day, I may be able to come and see—"

He broke down. He could, in his weak state, bear no more, and with a piteous cry he snatched away his hands and covered his convulsed features, as he lay back there quivering in every nerve.

And then from out of the deep, black darkness, mental and bodily, which closed him in, light shone out once more, as, gently and tenderly, a slight soft arm glided round his neck, and a cold, wet cheek was laid against his hands, while in low, measured tones, every word spoken calmly, almost in a whisper, but thrilling the suffering man to the core, Mary murmured—

"I never knew till now how much a woman's duty in life is to help and comfort those who suffer. John, dear, I have listened to everything you said, and feel it no shame now to speak out all that is in my heart. I always liked the frank, straightforward man who spoke to me as if he respected me; who never gave me a look that was not full of the reverence for me that I felt was in his breast. You never paid me a compliment, never talked to me but in words which I felt were wise and true. You made me like you, and now, once more, I tell you that when this trouble came I learned that I loved you. John, dear, this

great affliction has come to you—to us both, and I know you will learn to bear it in your own patient, wise way.”

“Yes, yes,” he groaned; “but blind—blind! Mary—for pity’s sake leave me—in the dark—in the dark.”

She rose from her knees by his side, and he uttered a sob, for he felt that she was going; but she retained one of his hands between hers in a firm, cool clasp.

“No, dear,” she said softly; “those who love are one. John Grange, I will never leave you, and your life shall not be dark. Heaven helping me, it shall be my task to lighten your way. You shall see with my eyes, dear; my hand shall always be there to guide you wherever you may go; and some day in the future, when we have grown old and grey, you shall look back, dear, with your strong, patient mind, and then tell me that I have done well, and that your path in life has not been dark.”

“Mary,” he groaned, “for pity’s sake don’t tempt me; it is more than I can bear.”

“It is no temptation, John,” she said softly, and in utter ignorance that there were black shadows across her and the stricken man, she bent down and kissed his forehead. “Last Sunday only, in church, I heard these words—‘If aught but death part me and thee.’”

She sank upon her knees once more, and with her hands clasped together and resting upon his breast, her face turned heavenwards, her eyes closed and her lips moving as if in prayer, while the two shadows which had been cast on the sunlight from the door softly passed away, James Ellis and Daniel Barnett stepping back on to the green, and standing looking in each other’s eyes, till the sound of approaching wheels was heard. Then assuming that that moment come up, James Ellis and the new head-gardener strode once more up to the door.

Chapter Eight.

Ellis had been so thoroughly astounded upon seeing Mary kneeling by John Grange’s side that he had made a quick sign to Barnett to come away; and as soon as they were at a short distance from the door he felt that his action had been ill-

judged, and likely to excite the derision of his companion, whom he had begun now to think of as a possible son-in-law.

"Wretched—foolish girl!" he said to himself, and leading the way, they both entered the bothy.

"Mary!" he cried angrily, "I am here. What is the meaning of this?"

Daniel Barnett, who was quivering with jealous rage, expected to see the bailiff's daughter spring to her feet, flushed with shame and dread, at being surprised in such a position, but to his astonishment she hardly stirred, merely raising her head a little to look gently and sadly in her father's face as she said—

"I have come to bid poor John Grange good-bye."

"Without my leave!" stormed Ellis, "and like this. Mary! Shameless girl, have you taken leave of your senses?"

She smiled at him sadly, and shook her head.

"Disgraceful!" cried Ellis. "What will Mr Barnett—what will every one think of your conduct?"

He caught her hand in his rage, and drew her sharply away as he turned to John Grange.

"And you, sir, what have you to say? Your weakness and injury are no excuse. Everything possible has been done for you. We have all worked for you, and tried to lighten your affliction; even now I have come with Mr Barnett to see you off, and I find my kindness returned by a cruel, underhanded, cowardly blow."

"Mr Ellis," began John, with his pale face flushing and his dark eyes wandering as he tried to fix them upon the speaker's face.

"Silence, sir! How dare you! How long has this disgraceful business been going on?"

"Oh, father, father!" cried Mary, clinging to him; "pray, pray say no more. We are not alone."

"No," cried Ellis, who had now worked himself into a towering passion; "we are not alone. Mr Barnett is here, a witness to the way in which this man has prevailed upon you to set all common decency at defiance, and come here alone. How long, I repeat, has this disgraceful business been going on?"

Mary was about to speak, but at that moment John Grange raised himself upon his elbow and said firmly—

"One moment, please, Mr Ellis; this is a matter solely between you and me. If Daniel Barnett is here, surely it is his duty, as a man, to go."

"I don't take my instructions from you, sir," cried Ellis; "and I beg and desire that Mr Barnett will stay and hear what I have to say to you—you miserable, underhanded, contemptible hound."

John Grange flushed, and noted the "Mr" applied again and again to his fellow-worker, and a pang of disappointment shot through him as he fully grasped what it meant.

"You are angry and bitter, sir," he said, though calmly, "and are saying things which you will regret. There has been nothing underhanded. That I have long loved Miss Ellis, I am proud to say; but until this present time no word has passed between us, and I have never, as you know, addressed her as a lover."

"Oh yes, you say so," cried Ellis angrily. "You talked finely enough the other day, but what about now? So this is the way in which you carry out your high principles, deluding a silly child into coming here for this clandestine interview, and making her—a baby as she is, and not knowing her own mind—believe that you are a perfect hero, and entangling her with your soft speeches into I don't know what promises."

"It is not true, sir," said John Grange sadly.

"How do I know it is not true, sir? Bah! It is true! I come here and find you and this shameless girl locked in each other's arms."

"Father!" cried Mary, snatching away her hand, and before Ellis could arrest her, going back to John Grange's side to lay that hand upon his shoulder, "I cannot stand here and listen to your cruel, unjust words; John Grange is not to blame, it was my doing entirely."

"Shame upon you, then!"

"No, it is no shame," she cried proudly. "You force me to defend myself before another, and I will speak out now before the man who has for long enough pestered me with his attentions, and whom, during these past few days, you have made your friend and encouraged to come home; let him hear then that I feel it

no shame to say I love John Grange very dearly, and that I would not let him leave here, weak, suffering, and in the dark, without knowing that his love was returned."

Then, bending down, she took John Grange's hand, and raised it to her lips.

"Good-bye!" she said softly.

"Mary!" cried her father, beside himself now with rage; and he once more snatched her away.

"Yes, father, I am ready," she said quietly; "and you, who are always so good and just, will tell John Grange that you have cruelly misjudged him, before he goes."

But James Ellis did not then, for drawing his child's arm through his own, he hurried her away from the bothy, and home in silence to the cottage, where she flung herself sobbing in her mother's arms, and crouched there, listening, while the angry man walked up and down, relieving himself of all he had seen.

Mrs Ellis's pleasant countenance grew full of puckers, and she sat in silence, softly patting Mary's shoulder with one hand, holding her tightly with the other, till her husband had ended with—

"Disgraceful—disgraceful, I say. I don't know what Mrs Mostyn would think if she knew."

"Well, I don't know, my dear," sighed Mrs Ellis, with the tears gently trickling down her cheeks, and dropping one by one like dew-drops on Mary's beautiful hair. "Mrs Mostyn has been a dear, good mistress to us."

"Yes, and a pretty business for her to hear—our child degrading herself like this."

"'Tis very sad, James, but Mrs Mostyn made a runaway match with Captain Mostyn."

"Eliza, are you mad too?"

"No, James, dear; but I'm afraid these are mysteries that men don't quite understand."

"Bah!"

"But they do not, dear. If you remember, my poor dear dad and your father were very angry about your wanting me. Dad said you were only a common gardener, but I felt—"

"Woman, you are as bad as your daughter," raged James Ellis. "Was I a poor blind man?"

"No, my dear; for you always had very, very fine eyes, but—"

"Bah!" raged out James Ellis; and he went out and banged the door.

Chapter Nine.

John Grange's journey to London was performed almost in silence, for as he sat back in the corner of the carriage, weak and terribly shaken by the scene through which he had passed, Daniel Barnett sat opposite to him, wishing that they did not live in a civilised country, but somewhere among savages who would think no ill of one who rid himself of a useless, troublesome rival.

But after a time rage gave way to contempt. He felt that he had nothing to fear from the helpless object in question. Mary never looked more attractive than when she stood up there defending the poor blind fellow before him.

"If I could only get her to be as fond of me, and ready to stick up for me like that!" he thought; and he softly rubbed his hands together. "And I will," he muttered. "She's very young, and it was quite natural. She'll soon forget poor old blind Jack, and then—but we shall see. Head-gardener at The Hollows, and James Ellis willing. I shall win, my lad, and step into the old man's shoes as well."

He parted from John Grange at the infirmary, and somehow the darkness did not seem so black to the sufferer for some days. For he was full of hope, a hope which grew stronger as the time went by. Then old Tummus came up to see him, and gladdened his heart with old-fashioned chatter about the garden, obstinately dwelling upon the "taters," and cabbages, and codlin and cat's-head apples, when the patient was eager to hear about the orchids, grapes, pines, and melons, which he pictured as he had seen them last.

But Mary's name was not mentioned, for John Grange had thought the matter out. It was impossible, he said, and time would soften the agony for both—unless his stay here proved of avail.

But the days glided by—a week—a fortnight—a month—then two months, during which specialists had seen him, consultations had been held; and then came the day when old Tummus was up in town again, with flowers and fruit, which John Grange took round the ward from patient to patient, walking slowly, but with little to show that he was blind, as he distributed the presents he had received, and said good-bye to his dark companions.

For the verdict had been passed by the profession who had seen him that they could do nothing, and Mrs Mostyn had sent word that Grange was to be fetched back, old Tummus and his wife gladly acceding to the proposal that the young man should lodge with them for a few weeks, till arrangements could be made for his entrance to some asylum, or some way hit upon for him to get his living free from the misery of having nothing to do.

"Cheer up, my lad!" said the old man, as they were on their way back.

"I do, old fellow," said John Grange quietly. "I have been two months in that place, and it has taught me patience. There, I am never going to repine."

"You're as patient as a lamb, my dear," said old Hannah the next day; "and it's wonderful to see how you go about and don't look blind a bit. Why, you go quite natural-like into our bit of garden, and begin feeling the plants."

"Yes," he said, "I feel happier then. I've been thinking, Hannah, whether a blind man could get his living off an acre of ground with plants and flowers that he could not see, but would know by the smell."

"Well, you do cap me, my dear," said the old woman. "I don't know." And then to herself, "Look at him, handsome and bright-eyed—even if he can't see, I don't see why he shouldn't manage to marry his own dear love after all. There'd be an eye apiece for them, there would, and an Eye above all-seeing to watch over 'em both."

And old Hannah wiped her own, as she saw John Grange stoop down and gently caress a homely tuft of southern-wood, passing his hands over it, inhaling the scent, and then talking to himself, just as Mrs Mostyn came up to the garden hedge, and stood watching him, holding up her hand to old Hannah, to be silent, and not let him know that she was there.

Chapter Ten.

"Wait and see, my lad, wait and see," said James Ellis. "There, there: we're in no hurry. You've only just got your appointment, and, as you know well enough, women are made of tender stuff. Very soft, Dan, my boy. Bless 'em, they're very nice though. We grow in the open air; they grow under glass, as you may say. We're outdoor plants; they're indoor, and soft, and want care. Polly took a fancy to poor John Grange, and his misfortune made her worse. He became a sort of hero for her school-girl imagination, and if you were to worry her, and I was to come the stern father, and say, You must marry Dan Barnett, what would be the consequences? She'd mope and think herself persecuted, and be ready to do anything for his sake."

Daniel Barnett sighed.

"There, don't be a fool, man," said Ellis, clapping him on the shoulder. "Have patience. My Pol— Mary is as dear and good a girl as ever stepped, and as dutiful. What we saw was all sentiment and emotion. She's very young, and every day she'll be growing wiser and more full of commonplace sense. Poor John Grange has gone."

"But he has come back, and is staying with old Tummus."

"Yes, yes, I know, but only for a few days, till Mrs Mostyn has settled something about him. She's a dear, good mistress, Dan, and I'd do anything for her. She consulted me about it only the other day. She wants to get him into some institution; and if she can't she'll pension him off somewhere. I think he'll go to some relatives of his out Lancashire way. But, anyhow, John Grange is as good as dead, so far as your career is concerned. You've got the post he was certain to have had, for the mistress was very fond of John."

"Yes; he'd got the length of her foot, and no mistake, sir."

"Well, well, you can do the same. She loves her flowers, and poor John was for his age as fine a florist as ever lived. She saw that, and of course it pleased her. All you have to do is to pet her orchids, and make the glass-houses spick and span, keep the roses blooming, and—there, I needn't preach to you, Daniel, my lad; you're as good a gardener as poor John Grange, and your bread is buttered on both sides for life."

"Not quite, sir," cried the young man quietly.

"All right; I know what you mean."

"Then you consent, sir?"

"Oh, no, I don't. I only say to you, wait and see. I'm not going to promise anything, and I'm not going to have my comfortable home made miserable by seeing wife and child glum and ready to burst out crying. I'm not going to force that tender plant, Dan. Mary's a sensible girl, and give her time and she'll see that it is impossible for her to spend her life playing stick, or little dog, to a blind man. She shall see that her father wishes what is best for her, and in the end the pretty little fruit, which is only green now, will become ripe, and drop into some worthy young fellow's hands. If his name is Daniel Barnett, well and good. We shall see. All I want is to see my pet go to a good home and be happy."

Daniel Barnett held out his hand.

"No, no; I'm going to clinch no bargains, and I'm not going to be bothered about this any more. Your policy is to wait. The seed's sown. I dare say it will come up some day. Now then, business. About Maitland Williams?"

"Well, Mr Ellis, you know him as well as I do. Admiral Morgan can't give him a rise because the other men are all right, and he wants to be a step higher, and be all under glass. He has spoken to me twice. He says he wouldn't have done so, only poor John Grange was of course out of it, and he didn't think that we had any one who could be promoted."

"That's quite right. He has been to me three times, and I don't see that we could do better. Think you could get on with him?"

"Oh, yes, he's all right, sir."

"Very well, then; I'm going up to the house to see the mistress about the hay. Nixon wants to buy it again this year."

"And take all the mowing off our hands, sir?"

"Yes, I suppose you would rather not spare the men to make it ourselves."

"Well, sir, you know the season as well as I do. There's no end of things asking to be done."

"Yes, I shall advise her to let it go, and I'll ask her to sanction Williams being taken on. He says he can come and fill poor Grange's place at once."

They parted, Daniel Barnett to go and begin tying up some loose strands in the vinery, and trim out some side-growth which interfered with the ripening of the figs; James Ellis to walk up to the house and ask to see Mrs Mostyn, who sent out word by the butler that she would be in the library in a few minutes.

Chapter Eleven.

Meanwhile there had been tears and trouble at the cottage, and Mary was sobbing in her mother's arms.

"But it seems so hard, dear," she whispered; "he's there, and waiting hopefully in the dark for me to go to him and say a few kind and loving words."

"That you can't go and say, dear. I know—I know, but you cannot go, my darling. Now, just think a bit: you know what father would say. He is certain to know that you have been, and it would be like flying in his face. Now come, come, do be patient and wait. Some day, perhaps, his sight may come back, and if it did I'm sure father loves you too well to stand in the way of your happiness."

"But you don't think as he does, mother dear, so don't say you think he is right."

"I'm afraid I must, dear, much as it goes against me to say so. It couldn't be, Mary—it couldn't indeed, my dear; and you know what you told me—how sensible and wise poor John Grange spoke about it himself. It would be a kind of madness, Mary, dear: so come, come, wipe your poor eyes. God knows what is

best for us all, and when the afflictions come let's try to bear them patiently."

"Yes, mother," cried Mary, hastily drying her eyes. "I will be patient and firm."

"And you see, dear, that it would not be right for you to go down to old Hannah's. It would be, as I said, like flying in the face of father, who, I'm sure, has been as nice as could be about all you did that day."

"Yes, mother," said Mary, with another sigh. "Then I will be patient and wait."

"That's right, my darling. And there, now I'll tell you something I heard from father. Poor John Grange is not forgotten; Mrs Mostyn is trying to place him in a home, and if she doesn't, he's to go to some friends, and she's going to pension him for life."

Mary sighed once more, a deeper, more painful sigh, one which seemed to tear its way through her heart, as in imagination she saw the fine manly fellow who had won that heart pursuing his dark road through life alone, desolate, and a pensioner.

Up at the house James Ellis was not kept waiting long before there was a rustling sound, and Mrs Mostyn came in through the French window from the conservatory, which ran along one side of the house.

She looked radiant and quite young, in spite of her sixty-five years and silver hair, and there was a happy smile upon her lip that brightened the tears in her eyes, as she nodded to her agent cheerfully, and held out a great bunch of newly-cut orchids, which she held in her hand.

"Smell those, James Ellis. Look at them. Are they not beautiful?"

"Yes, ma'am, and if you sent them to the Guildstone Show they'd take the first prize."

"And the plants come back half spoiled. No, I don't think I shall. I have them grown for their beauty and perfection, not out of pride and emulation. You never used to grow me and my dear husband such flowers when you were head-gardener, James."

"No, ma'am," said Ellis, smiling at his mistress, as she sat down, drew a great shallow china bowl to her side, and began

to daintily arrange the quaint, beautifully-tinted blooms according to her taste; "no, ma'am, but there were no such orchids in those days."

"Ah, no! That's forty years ago, James Ellis. Well, what is it this morning?"

"About the big oak, ma'am. It is three parts dead, and in another year it will be gone. Of course, it's a bad time of year, but I thought if it was cut down now, I might—"

"Don't! Never say a word to me again about cutting down a tree, James Ellis," cried his mistress angrily.

The bailiff made a deprecating sign.

"Let them stand till they die. Tell Barnett to plant some of that beautiful clematis to run over the dead branches. No more cutting down dead boughs while I live."

"Very good, ma'am."

"Is that all?"

"No, ma'am; about the hay. Mr Nixon would be glad to have it at the market price."

"Of course, let Mr Nixon have all you can spare. And now I'm very busy, James Ellis—by the way, how is your wife, and how is Mary?"

"Quite well, thank you, ma'am," said the bailiff, hesitating, as he turned when half-way to the door.

"I am glad of it. Mind that Mary has what flowers she likes for her little greenhouse."

"Thank you, ma'am, she will be very pleased, but—"

"Yes! What?"

"There was one other thing, ma'am. Daniel Barnett has been speaking to me about help, and there is one of Admiral Morgan's men wants to leave to better himself. I know the young man well. An excellent gardener, who would thoroughly suit. His character is unexceptionable, and he is an excellent grower of orchids."

"Oh!" said Mrs Mostyn sharply; "and you want me to engage him to take poor John Grange's place?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the bailiff respectfully. "The Admiral will recommend him strongly, and I don't think you could do better."

"Then I do," cried the lady, bringing down one hand so heavily upon the table that the water leaped out of the bowl on to the cloth. "James Ellis," she said, rising, "come with me."

The bailiff stared, and followed the rustling silk dress out through the French window, and along the tiled floors of the conservatory, to the angle where it turned suddenly and went along by the drawing-room.

There she stopped suddenly, with her eyes looking bright and tearful once more, as she pointed to the far end and whispered—

"Not do better, James Ellis? Man, what do you say to that?"

Chapter Twelve.

James Ellis did not say anything to "that" for a few moments, but stood rubbing the bridge of his nose with the hard rim of his hat, which he held in his hand.

For there, to his utter astonishment, was John Grange, bright-eyed, erect, and with his face lit up with eager pleasure, busily tying up a plant to the sticks from which its strands had strayed. A few pieces of raffia grass were hung round his neck, his sleeves were turned up, and, evidently in utter ignorance of the fact that he was being watched, he bent over the plant upon its shelf, and with deft fingers traced the course of this branch and that, and following all up in turn, tied those which were loose. After cutting the grass as he tied each knot, he examined the plant all over with his fingers till he found one wanton, wild, unnecessary shoot, and passing the knife-blade down to its origin, he was in the act of cutting it off when James Ellis made a gesture to stop him, but was arrested by Mrs Mostyn, who held up her hand and frowned.

By that time the shoot was neatly taken off—cut as a gardener can cut, drawing his knife slightly and cleverly across, making

one of those wounds in the right place which heal so easily in the young skin.

Then Grange's hands played about the plant for a few minutes as he felt whether it was in perfect balance, and pressed it back a little upon the shelf, measuring by a touch whether it was exactly in its place.

Directly after he walked across that end of the conservatory without a moment's hesitation, stopped before the opposite stand, and stretched out his hand to place it upon a pot, about whose contents it began to stray, was withdrawn, extended again, and then wandered to the pots on either side; but only to be finally withdrawn, the poor fellow looking puzzled, and Mrs Mostyn smiled, nodded, and placing her lips close to the bailiff's ear, whispered—

"There used to be another of those white pelargoniums standing there."

By this time John Grange's hands were busy at a shelf above, and the lookers-on watched with keen interest for the result, for the flower he sought had been moved on to the higher range, and they were both wondering whether he would find it.

They were not long kept in suspense, for John Grange's hand touched one of the leaves the next moment, pressed it gently, raised it to his nose, and a look of satisfaction came into the poor fellow's face as, with a smile, he bent over, lifted the pot from its place, stood it on the floor, and went down on one knee to begin examining the plant all over with fingers grown white, soft, and delicate during his illness.

Mrs Mostyn kept on glancing brightly at James Ellis, as if she were saying, "Do you see that? Isn't it wonderful?" And the bailiff stared, and kept on rubbing his nose with the hard brim of his felt hat, while he watched John Grange's fingers run up the tender young shoots, and, without injuring a blossom, busy themselves among those where the green aphides had made a nursery, and were clustering thickly, drawing the vital juices from the succulent young stems. And then bringing all his old knowledge to bear, he knelt down on both knees, so that he could nip the pot between them with the plant sloping away from him, and with both hands at liberty, he softly removed the troublesome insects, those which he failed to catch, and which fell from their hold, dropping on to the floor instead of back among the leaves of the plant.

Every flower, bud, and shoot was examined by touch before the pot was once more stood upright, the various shoots tried as to whether they were properly tied up to their sticks, and then the young man rose, lifted a plant from the lower shelf, placed it where the pelargonium had stood, and lastly, after raising it from the floor, and smelling its leaves, arranged it in the place on the shelf where he had left it a couple of days before his accident.

The next minute he walked to where another was standing, as if led by a wonderful instinct, though it was only the result of years of care, application, and method, for he had worked in that conservatory till he knew the position of every ornamental plant as well as he knew its requirements, how long it would last, take to flower, and with what other kind he would replace it from one end of the year to the other.

Mrs Mostyn and her bailiff stood watching John Grange for quite half-an-hour, in what seemed to the latter almost a miraculous performance, and in those hasty minutes they both plainly saw the man's devotion to his work, his love for the plants he cultivated, and how thoroughly he was at home in the house and interested in what had taken place in his enforced absence. He showed them, by his actions, that he knew how much the plumbago had grown on the trellis, how long the shoots were that had been made on the layer, and his fingers ran from one mazy cluster of buds and flowers to another; hard-wooded shrubby stems were examined for scale, which was carefully removed; and every now and then he paused and placed his hands on the exact place to raise up some fragrant plant—lemon verbena or heliotrope—to inhale its sweet odour and replace it with a sigh of satisfaction.

James Ellis watched the young gardener, expecting moment by moment, and, in his then frame of mind, almost hoping to see him knock down some pot on to the tiled floor, or stumble over some flower-stand. But he watched in vain, and he thought the while that if John Grange, suffering as he was from that awful infliction, could be so deft and clever there amongst that varied collection of flowers, his work in the other houses among melons, pines, cucumbers, tomatoes, and grapes would soon grow simplicity itself, for, educated as he was by long experience, he would teach himself to thin grapes by touch, train the fruit-bearing stems of the cucumber and melon vines, and remove the unnecessary shoots of the tomatoes with the greatest ease. There would be a hundred things he could do, and each year he would grow more accustomed to working by

touch. And as James Ellis thought, he, an old gardener, shut his eyes fast, and, in imagination, saw before him a fresh growing tomato plant, and beginning at the bottom, felt whether it was stiff and healthy. Then ran up his fingers past the few leaves to the first great cluster of large fruit, removed the young shoots which came from the axils of the leaves, and ran up and up the stem feeling the clusters gradually growing smaller till higher up there were fully-developed blossoms, and higher still tufts of buds and tender leaves with their surface covered with metallic golden down.

He started from his musing to gaze open-eyed at his mistress, who had touched his arm, and now signed to him to follow her softly back to the library window, and into the room.

"Why, James Ellis!" she said petulantly, "were you asleep?"

"No, ma'am, I was shutting my eyes to try how it would be amongst the plants."

"Ah," she said, with the tears now brimming up into her eyes; "isn't it wonderful? Poor fellow, I cannot tell you how happy it has made me feel. Why, James Ellis, I had been thinking that he had to face a desolate, blank existence, and I was nearly heart-broken about him, and all the time, as you saw, he was going about happy and light-hearted, actually smiling over his work."

"Yes, ma'am," said the bailiff rather gruffly, "it seems very wonderful. I don't think he can be quite blind."

"What!"

"His eyes look as bright as any one else's, ma'am."

"You think then that he is an impostor?"

"Oh, no, ma'am, I wouldn't say that."

"No, James Ellis, you had better not," said his mistress tartly. "Well, you saw what he can do."

"Yes, ma'am, and I was very much surprised. I did not know he was here;" and Ellis spoke as if he felt rather aggrieved.

"I suppose not," said Mrs Mostyn dryly. "I saw him in old Tummus's garden yesterday, and I walked across and fetched him here this morning to see what he could do in the

conservatory, and really, blind as he is, he seems more clever and careful than Daniel Barnett."

James Ellis coughed a little, in a dry, nervous way.

"And now I repeat my question, what do you say to that?"

"Well, ma'am, I—er—that is—"

"You want me to engage one of Admiral Morgan's men to take poor John Grange's place?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the bailiff, recovering himself; "and I don't think, you can do better."

"But I don't want another man."

The bailiff shrugged his shoulders, and looked deprecatingly at his mistress.

"I know you like the garden and houses to look well, ma'am, and we're two hands short."

"No, we are not, James Ellis. Old Dunton has done nothing in the garden but look on for years. I only wished for my poor husband's old servant to end his days in peace; and do you think I am going to supersede that poor fellow whom we have just been watching?"

"But, pardon me, ma'am, there are many things he could never do."

"Then Barnett must do them, and I shall make a change for poor John Grange's sake: I shall give up showy flowers and grow all kinds that shed perfume. That will do. It is impossible for Grange to be head-gardener, but he will retain his old position, and you may tell Barnett that Grange is to do exactly what he feels is suitable to him. He is not to be interfered with in any way."

"Yes, ma'am," said the bailiff respectfully.

"If he is so wonderful now, I don't know what he will be in a few months. Now, you understand: John Grange is to continue in his work as if nothing had happened, and— you here?"

For at that moment two hands busy tying up some loose strands of a Bougainvillea dropped to their owner's side, and

poor John Grange, who had come up to the window unheard, uttered a low cry as he stood with his head bent forward and hands half extended toward the speaker.

"Mrs Mostyn—dear mistress," he faltered, "Heaven bless you for those words!"

"God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, John Grange," she said softly, as she laid her hand upon one of those extended toward her as if to reach light in darkness; "should not His servants strive to follow that which they are taught?"

The blank, bright eyes gazed wildly toward her, and then the head was bowed down over the hand which was touched by two quivering lips, as reverently as if it had been that of a queen.

Five minutes later James Ellis was on his way back to the gardens, thinking it was time that Mary went away from home to begin life as a governess, or as attendant to some invalid dame.

Chapter Thirteen.

James Ellis went straight to the gardens, and had no difficulty in finding Daniel Barnett, whose voice he heard sounding loud, though smothered, in the closely-shut orchid-house, where he was abusing one of the under-gardeners.

"I don't care—I don't believe it," he cried angrily, as Ellis opened the door slowly; and then came: "Hi! What idiot's that? Don't let all the cold wind in out of the garden. I say that glossum and that cattleya has been moved. Hi! Are you going to shut that door? Oh, it's you, Mr Ellis. I thought it was one of the lads; they will not be careful with those doors."

"Send him away," said the bailiff.

"You can go," said Barnett shortly, to the man, "and mind, I mean to know who moved those orchids. It was done out of opposition. I changed 'em there, and that's where they're to stand."

"Well, I didn't move 'em," growled the man.

"Didn't move them, *sir*" cried Barnett; but at that moment the door was closed with a bang. "I shall have to get rid of that fellow, Mr Ellis. He don't like me being promoted, and he has been moving my orchids out o' orkardness. Ha, ha! Not so very bad, that."

"He did not move them," said Ellis grimly.

"Who did, then?"

"John Grange."

"John Grange?"

"Yes; I dare say he has been here. He has been in the big conservatory ever so long, tying up plants and clearing off dead stuff."

"John Grange! What, has he got back his sight?"

"No; the mistress fetched him over from old Tummus's cottage, and he has been hard at work ever so long."

"But there wasn't no clearing up to do," cried Barnett, flushing angrily.

"Wasn't there? Well, he was at it, and you may tell that fellow he won't be wanted, for John Grange is going to stay."

Daniel Barnett said something which, fortunately, was inaudible, and need not be recorded; and he turned pale through the harvest brown sun-tan with mortification and jealous rage.

"Why, you don't mean to say, Mr Ellis, *sir*," he cried, "that you've been a party to bringing that poor creature back here to make himself a nuisance and get meddling with my plants?"

"No, *sir*, I do not," said the bailiff sharply; "it's your mistress's work. She has a way of doing what she likes, and you'd better talk to her about that."

He turned upon his heel and left the orchid-house, and as soon as he was gone the new head-gardener stood watching him till he was out of hearing, and then, doubling up his fist, he struck out from the shoulder at one of the offending pots standing at a corner—a lovely mauve-tinted cattleya in full blossom—and sent it flying to shivers upon the floor.

It was the kind of blow he felt in his rage that he would have liked to direct at John Grange's head, but as in his unreasonable jealous spite it was only a good-sized earthenware pot, the result was very unsatisfactory, for the flower was broken, the pot shattered, and a couple of red spots appeared on Daniel Barnett's knuckles, which began to bleed freely.

"That's it, is it?" he muttered. "He's to be kept here like a pet monkey, I suppose. Well, he's not going to interfere with my work, and so I tell him. Don't want no blind beggars about. A silly old fool: that's what she is—a silly old fool; and I should like to tell her so. So he's to come here and do what he likes, is he? Well, we shall see about that. It's indecent, that's what it is. Why can't he act like a man, and take it as he should, not come whining about here like a blind beggar of Bethnal Green? But if he can't see, others can. Perhaps Mr John Grange mayn't stop here very long. Who knows?" Daniel Barnett, for some reason or another, uttered a low-toned, unpleasant laugh, and then began to pick up the pieces of the broken pot, and examine the injured orchid, to see what portions would live; but after a few minutes' inspection he bundled all into a wooden basket, carried it out to the rubbish heap, and called one of the men to sweep up the soil upon the red-tiled floor.

Chapter Fourteen.

The days glided by and John Grange's powers developed in a wonderful way. He busied himself about the glass-houses from morning to night, but he did not return to the bothy in the grounds, preferring to go on lodging with old Hannah and her husband.

At first the men used to watch him, leaving off their work to talk together when he passed down the garden, and first one and then another stood ready to lend him a helping hand; but this never seemed to be needed, Grange making sure by touching a wall, fence, shrub, or some familiar object whose position he knew, and then walking steadily along with no other help than a stick, and finding his way anywhere about the grounds.

"It caps me, lads!" said old Tummus; "but there, I dunno: he allus was one of the clever ones. Look at him now; who'd ever think that he was blind as a mole? Why, he walks as upright as I do."

There was a roar of laughter at this.

"Well, so he do," cried old Tummus indignantly.

"That ain't saying much, old man," said one of the gardeners; "why, you go crawling over the ground like a rip-hook out for a walk."

"Ah, never mind," grumbled old Tummus, "perhaps if you'd bent down to your work as I have, you'd be as much warped. Don't you get leaving tools and barrers and garden-rollers all over the place now."

"Why not?"

"'Cause we, none on us, want to see that poor lad fall over 'em, and break his legs. Eh?"

No one did; and from that hour a new form of tidiness was observed in Mrs Mostyn's garden.

Daniel Barnett said very little, but quite avoided Grange, who accepted the position, divining as he did the jealous feeling of his new superior, and devoted himself patiently to such tasks as he could perform, but instinctively standing on his guard against him whom he felt to be his enemy.

A couple of months had gone by when, one day, Mrs Mostyn came upon Grange in the conservatory, busily watering various plants which a touch had informed him required water.

"Do you think it would hurt some of the best orchids to make a good stand full of them here for a couple of days, Grange?" said his mistress. "I have a friend coming down who takes a great deal of interest in these plants."

"There is always the risk of giving them a check, ma'am," said Grange quietly; "but if you wouldn't mind the place being kept rather close, and a little fire being started to heat the pipes, they would be quite right."

"Oh, do what you think best," said Mrs Mostyn, "and make me a good handsome show by the day after to-morrow. Just there, between these two windows."

"If you'll excuse me, ma'am, they would be better on the other side against the house. They would show off better, and be less likely to get a check if a window was opened, as might happen."

"Of course, John Grange. Then put them there. I want a good, brilliant show, mind, to please my friend."

"They shall be there, ma'am. I'll get a stand cleared at once, ma'am, and put the orchids on to-morrow."

By that evening one of the large stands was clear, all but a few flowers to keep it from looking blank, and late on the next afternoon Daniel Barnett encountered old Tummus.

"Hullo, where are you going with that long barrow?"

"Orchid-house, to fetch pots."

"What for?"

"Muster Grange wants me to help him make up a stand in the zervyturry."

Daniel Barnett walked off muttering—

"I'm nobody, of course. It ain't my garden. Better make him head at once."

"Beautiful! Lovely!" cried Mrs Mostyn, as she stood in front of the lovely bank of blossoms; "and capitally arranged, John Grange. Why, it is quite a flower show."

That evening the guest arrived to dinner in the person of a great physician, whose sole relaxation was his garden; and directly after breakfast the next morning, full of triumph about the perfection of her orchids, Mrs Mostyn led the way into the conservatory, just as John Grange hurried out at the garden entrance, as if to avoid being seen.

"A minute too late," said the doctor, smiling; "but I thought you said that the man who attends to this place was quite blind?"

"He is! That is the man, but no one would think it. Now you shall see what a lovely stand of orchids he has arranged by touch. It is really wonderful what a blind man can do."

"Yes, it is wonderful, sometimes," replied the visitor. "I have noticed many cases where Nature seems to supply these afflicted people with another sense, and—"

"Oh, dear me! Oh, you tiresome, stupid man! My poor flowers! I wouldn't for a hundred pounds have had this happen, and just

too when I wanted it all as a surprise for you. That's why he hurried out."

"Ah, dear me!" said the great physician, raising his glasses to his eye. "Such lovely specimens, too. Poor fellow! He must have slipped. A sad accident due to his blindness, of course, while watering, I presume."

For there, on the red-tiled floor of the conservatory, lay an overturned watering-can, whose contents had formed a muddy puddle, in which were about a dozen broken pots just as they had been knocked down from the stand, the bulbs snapped, beautiful trusses of blossom shivered and crushed, and the whole display ruined by the gap made in its midst.

The tears of vexation stood in Mrs Mostyn's eyes, but she turned very calm directly as she walked back into the drawing-room and rang, looking white now with anger and annoyance.

"Send John Grange to the conservatory directly," she said to the butler, and then walked back with her guest.

Five minutes later John Grange came in from the garden, and the great physician watched him keenly, as the young man's eye looked full of trouble and his face twitched a little as he went towards where he believed his mistress to be.

"What is the meaning of this horrible destruction, Grange?" she cried.

"I don't know, ma'am," he replied excitedly. "I came in and found the pots all down only a few moments ago."

"That will do," she said sternly, and she turned away with her guest. "Even he cannot speak the truth, doctor. Oh, what cowards some men can be!"

Chapter Fifteen.

Mrs Mostyn said but little more, though she thought a great deal. John Grange gave her his explanation. He had, he said, been into the conservatory twice that morning; and on the second visit brought the can of water to give the orchids a final freshening, when he felt something crush beneath his feet, and,

startled and horrified at finding what was wrong, he had dropped the pot of water and added to the mishap.

Mrs Mostyn said, "That will do," rather coldly; and the young man went away crushed, feeling that she did not believe him, and that the morning's business had, in her disappointment, cast him down from his high position.

A day or two later he tried to renew the matter, but he received a short "That will do"; and, humbled and disheartened, he went away, feeling that his position at The Hollows would never be the same again.

It was talked over at the cottage, where Mary listened in agony.

"Pity he did not own to having met with an accident at once," said her father. "Of course it is no more than one expected, it was sure to come some time; but it was a pity he was such a coward and took refuge in a lie. Just like a child: but, poor fellow, his accident has made him weak."

Mary flushed up in her agony and indignation, for it was as if her father had accused her of untruthfulness; but an imploring look from her mother, just as she was going to speak, silenced her, and she suffered to herself till her father had gone, and then indignantly declared that John Grange was incapable of telling a lie.

The trouble was discussed too pretty largely at old Hannah's cottage, where Tummus's wife gave it as her opinion that it was "one of they dratted cats." They was always breaking something, and if the truth was known it was "the missus's Prusshun Tom, as she allers called Shah."

"I don't want to accuse anybody," said John Grange sadly, as he sat with a piteous look in his blank eyes; "but I'm afraid one of the servants must have stumbled up against the stand, and was then afraid to speak."

"Burr-urr!" growled old Tummus, who was devouring his late meal—a meat tea, the solid part consisting of a great hunch of bread and upon it a large piece of cold boiled, streaky, salt pork.

"Don't make noises like that at the table, Tummus," said his wife. "What will Mr Grange think of you?"

"Only said 'Burr-urr!'" grumbled old Tummus.

"Well, you shouldn't; and I do wish you would use the proper knife and fork like a Christian, and keep your pork on your plate."

"This here's quite sharp enough, missus," said the old man, cutting the piece of pork with the blade of his great pruning-knife, and re-arranging the piece under his perfectly clean but dirty-looking, garden-stained thumb.

"But it looks so bad, cutting like that; and how do we know what you used that knife for last."

"Well, Muster John Grange can't see, can he?"

"No, no, I cannot see, man," said Grange sadly. "Go on in your own way as if I were not here."

"Burr-urr!" growled old Tummus again.

"Why, what is the matter with the man?" cried his wife. "Have you not meat enough?"

"Aye, it's right enow. I was only thinking about them orchards. I know."

"Know what?" said his wife.

"Who done it. I see him go there and come away."

"What?" cried John Grange excitedly, as he turned his eyes towards the old gardener.

"I see Muster Dan Barnett come away from the conservatory all in a hurry like, d're'ckly after you'd been there."

"You saw Dan Barnett?"

"Aye, that's so. I see him: did it out o' spite 'cause the missus didn't give him the job."

"Tummus, what are you a-saying of?" cried his wife, as the old man's words made Grange start excitedly from his chair. "Why, if Dan'l Barnett heared as you said that, you'd be turned away at a moment's notice."

"I don't keer; it's the solomon truth," said old Tummus, cutting off a cubic piece of pork and lifting it from his bread with the point of his pruning-knife.

"It can't be anything of the sort, so hold your tongue. There, there, Mr Grange, my dear. Don't you take any notice of his silly clat. Have another cup of tea: here's quite a beauty left."

"You say you saw Daniel Barnett come from the conservatory that morning?" cried Grange excitedly; and there was a wild look of agony in his eyes as he spoke.

"Nay, nay, he didn't, my dear," cried old Hannah; "it's all his nonsense. Just see what you've done, Tummus, with your rubbishing stuff."

"Aye, but I did see him come out, and I see him go in all of a hurry like," said old Tummus sturdily.

"Where were you?"

"In the shrubbery, raking up the dead leaves as he told me to the night afore, and forgotten as I was there so near."

"And you were busy raking the leaves?" said Grange.

"Nay, I warn't; I was a-watching on him, and left off, for I didn't see what he wanted there."

"No, no, it's impossible; he would have been so careful," said Grange hurriedly.

"Keerful?" cried old Tummus contemptuously: "he did it o' purpose. I know: out o' spite."

"Tummus, you're driving us in a coach and four into the workhouse," cried his wife passionately.

"Good job too. I don't keer. I say Dan Barnett did it out o' spite, and I'll go straight to the missus and tell her."

"No," said John Grange sternly. "Not a word. What you say is impossible. Daniel Barnett does not like me, and he resents my being here, but he could not have been guilty of so cowardly, so contemptible an act."

"Burr-urr!" growled old Tummus; "wouldn't he? I know."

"Whatever you know," said John Grange sternly, "you must keep to yourself."

"What, and let the missus think you done it?"

"The truth comes to the surface some time or another," said John Grange very firmly. "I cannot believe this is the truth, but even if it is I forbid you to speak."

"Yes; he'd better," put in old Hannah, shaking her head severely at her husband; and the meal was finished in silence.

Another month had passed, and John Grange's position remained unchanged. He worked in the houses, and tied up plants by the green walks; but Mrs Mostyn never came round to stand by his side and talk to him regarding her flowers, and ask questions about the raising of fresh choice plants for the garden. In those painful minutes he had fallen very low in her estimation, and was no longer the same in her eyes, only the ordinary gardener whom she kept on out of charity, and whom she would keep on to the end of her days.

John Grange felt it bitterly, and longed to get away from a place which caused him intense agony, for, from time to time, he could not help knowing that Daniel Barnett went up to smoke a pipe with James Ellis, and talk about the garden.

But the sufferer was helpless. He could not decide what to do if he went away, for there was no talk now of getting him into an asylum; and in spite of all his strong endeavours and determination to be manly and firm, he felt that it would be impossible to go away from The Hollows and leave Mary Ellis.

From time to time Barnett saw little things which convinced him that so long as John Grange was near he would have no chance of making any headway with the object of his pursuit, and this made him so morose and bitter that he would often walk up and down one of the shrubberies on dark nights, inveighing against his rival, who still did not accept his position, but hung on in a place where he was not wanted.

"The girl's mad about him," he muttered, "absolutely mad, and—"

He stopped short, thoroughly startled by the thoughts which came into his mind. It was as if a temptation had been whispered to him, and, looking sharply round in the darkness, he hurried back to the bothy. That night he lay awake tossing about till morning. That very day he had encountered John Grange twice at the end of the long green walk, with its sloping sides and velvet turf, at the top of which slopes were long beds filled with dahlias. These John Grange was busy tying up to their sticks, and, as if unable to keep away, Barnett hung about

that walk, and bullied the man at one end who was cutting the grass by hand where the machine could not be used; and at last made the poor fellow so wroth that he threw down his scythe as soon as Barnett had gone, and said he might do it himself.

Barnett came to the other end a couple of hundred yards away, and began to find fault with the way in which the dahlias were being tied up.

But John Grange bore it all without a word, though his lips quivered a little.

This was repeated, and Grange felt that it was the beginning of a course of persecution to drive him away.

Barnett went down the long green path till nearly at the end, when the dinner-bell began to ring, and just then he came upon the scythe lying where the man had thrown it in his pet.

"Humph!" ejaculated Barnett. "Well, he won't have Mrs Mostyn to take his part. Pretty thing if I can't find fault with those under me."

At that moment he turned, and there, a hundred yards away, was John Grange coming along to his dinner, erect, and walking at a fair pace along the green walk, touching the side from time to time with his stick so as to keep in the centre.

The idea came like a flash, and Daniel Barnett glanced round. No one appeared to be in sight, and quick as thought it was done. One sharp thrust at the bent handle was sufficient to raise the scythe blade and swing it round across the green path, so that the keen edge rose up and kept in position a few inches above the grass right in John Grange's path as he came steadily on.

The next moment Barnett had sprung among the bushes, and was gone.

Chapter Sixteen.

The late Albert Smith, in his *Christopher Tadpole*, describes a lady whose weakness was periwinkles. Old Hannah likewise had a weakness, but it was not for that unpleasant-looking curly

mollusc which has to be wriggled out with a pin, but, as she expressed it, "a big mellow Williams pear with a maddick in it."

Old Hannah's "maddick" was, of course, a maggot in north-country language, but it was not that she had a liking for the larva of a fly, but for the fruit in which that maggot lived for as a gardener's wife she knew well enough that very often those were the finest pears, the first to ripen, that they fell off the tree and were useless for the purpose of dessert, and were often left to rot. So that, knowing well his wife's weakness, old Tummus would pick up a fallen pear when he saw it under the tree in September, show it to old Dunton, who would nod his head, and the destination of that pear would be Tummus's pocket.

Now there was a fine old pyramid pear-tree not far from the green walk, and while hoeing away at the weeds that morning, where the rich soil made them disposed to grow rampant, old Tummus came upon "the very moral" of the pear his old woman would like. It was big, mellow, and streaked with vermilion and patched with gold; and had evidently lain there two nights, for its fragrant odour had attracted a slug, which had carved a couple of round cells in the side, close to where the round black hole betrayed where the maggot lived, and sundry other marks showed that it was still at hand.

Tummus picked up that pear and laid it in the green cup formed by a young broccoli plant, went on with his hoeing till the bell rang, and was half-way to the gate, stick and lunch-basket in hand, when he remembered the pear, and hurried back—that is to say, he walked back—not quite so slowly as usual, for Tummus never ran. A man that came from "his parts" remembered that the old man had been known to run once, at some cottagers' festival, but that was ages before, and ever since he had walked very deliberately.

Anyhow, he found the pear, and was returning to cut across the green path, when he caught sight of Daniel Barnett, and stopped short.

"I forgetted as poor old Dunton's dead," he thought, "He'll turn nasty if I ask him about the pear; and what's he a-doing of?"

Old Tummus peered through a great row of scarlet-runners and stared at his superior, and saw him bend over something on the green path, and then dart in among the bushes and disappear.

"Now what is he doing of?" old Tummus muttered. "Not a-going to— Why here comes poor Master Grange. Well, he couldn't have seen him. Not a-setting o' no more traps, is he?"

Old Tummus watched for a moment or two, and then walked right across the borders to reach the green path, breathless, just before John Grange came up, and shouted loudly—

"Ware well!"

It was just in time, for in another instant the blind man's ankle would have struck severely against the keen scythe edge, which by accident or malignant design was so placed that its cut would have proved most dangerous, that is to say, in a slightly diagonal position—that is, it would have produced what is known to swordsmen as a draw-cut.

But the poor fellow escaped, for, at the first warning of danger he stopped short, erect in his place, with his nostrils widening and face turned towards the speaker.

"Well?" he cried. "Impossible! I am three parts of the way along the green path."

"Aye, that's so, Muster Grange," said old Tummus, carefully removing the scythe, and placing it in safety by hooking the blade high up in a dense yew-tree. "No well here, but I thought it best any way to stop you."

"To stop me? Why?" cried Grange.

"'Cause some one as ought to be kicked out o' the place left his scythe lying across the grass ready for you to chop your shins. It's all right now."

They walked on in silence till they reached a gate opening upon the green meadow, where John Grange stopped short with his hand resting upon the upper bar.

"What is it, my lad?" said old Tummus.

"I was only thinking of how helpless I am. I thank you, Tummus," he said simply, as he turned and held out his hand. "I might have cut myself terribly."

"Aye, you might, my lad. There, go on to your dinner, and tell the missus I shall be there directly."

John Grange wrung the old man's hand, and went on in perfect ignorance of the trap that had been laid, with the idea that if he were injured and had to go to a hospital once again, it was not likely that he would return to the gardens; while old Tummus went off to the tool-shed, a quiet, retired nook, suitable for a good think, to cogitate as to what he should do under the circumstances.

His first thought was to go straight to Mrs Mostyn, and tell her what he had seen, and also about the orchids, but he argued directly that his mistress would not believe him.

"For I didn't see him upset the orchards, and as to this here business," he thought, "nobody wouldn't believe as a human being would go and do such a thing. Dunno as I would mysen if I hadn't seen it, and I arn't quite sure now as he meant to do it, though it looks as much like it as ever it could. He's got his knife into poor John Grange, somehow, and I don't see why, for the poor fellow arn't likely to do much harm to anybody now."

Then he considered for a bit as to whether he should tell John Grange what he had seen; but he concluded that he would not, for it would only make the poor fellow miserable if he believed him.

Old Tummus was still considering as to the best course when the two o'clock bell rang, and he jumped up to go back to his work.

"Never mind," he thought, with a grin, "I dessay there'll be a few cold taters left, and I must have them with my tea."

That same evening, after old Tummus had finished a meal which more than made up for his abstemiously plain dinner, he made up his mind to tell John Grange out in the garden.

"For," said he to himself, "I mayn't be there next time there's a scythe across the path, and who knows but what some day it may be the well in real airnest; Dan Barnett may leave the lid off, or uncover the soft-water tank, and the poor chap be drowned 'fore he knows it."

But when he went out he found his lodger looking so happy and contented, tying up the loose shoots of the monthly rose which ran over the cottage, that he held his tongue.

"It arn't my business," he argued, and he went off to meet an old crony or two in the village.

"Don't let any one run away with the house while I'm gone, Mr John," said old Hannah, a few minutes later. "I'm going down to the shop, and I shan't be very long."

Grange nodded pleasantly, and went on with his work.

That night Mary Ellis sat at her open window, sad and thoughtful, inhaling the cool, soft breeze which came through the trees, laden with woodland scents. The south-eastern sky was faintly aglow, lit up by the heralds of the rising moon, and save the barking of a dog up at the kennels, all was still.

She was thinking very deeply of her position, and of Daniel Barnett's manner towards her the last time they met. It was plain enough that her father favoured the head-gardener's visits, and in her misery her thoughts turned to John Grange, the tears falling softly the while. All at once she started away from the window, for, plainly heard, a low, deep sigh came from the dark shadow of the trees across the road.

Daniel Barnett? John Grange? There so late? Who could it be?

Her heart said John Grange, for the wish was father to the thought.

But she heard nothing more for a few minutes, and then in a whisper, hardly above the breath, the words—

"Good-bye—for ever, perhaps—good-bye!"

Then came the hurrying sound of steps on the dewy grass at the side of the road, and the speaker was gone, leaving Mary leaning out of the window, excited and trembling violently, while her heart beat in the stillness of the night as if it were the echo of the hurried pace rapidly dying away.

"It could not be—it could not be," she sighed at last, as she left the window to prepare for bed. "And yet he loves me so dearly. But why should he say that?"

She stopped in the middle of the room, and the words seemed to repeat themselves—

"Good-bye—for ever, perhaps—good-bye!"

The tears fell fast as she felt that it was so like John Grange in his manly, honourable way of treating their positions.

"He feels it all so terribly that it would be like tying me down—that it would be terrible for me—because he is blind."

She wiped her eyes, and a bright smile played about her lips, for there, self-pictured, was a happy future for them both, and she saw herself lightening the great trouble of John Grange's life, and smoothing his onward course. There was their happy home with her husband seeing with her eyes, guided always by her hand, and looking proud, manly, and strong once more as she had known him of old.

"It will only draw us closer together," she said softly; "and father will never refuse when he once feels it's for my happiness and for poor John's good."

But the smile died out as black clouds once more rose to blot out the pleasant picture she had formed in her mind; and as the mists gathered the tears fell once more, hot, briny tears which seemed to scald her eyes as she sank upon her knees by the bedside and buried her face in her hands.

That night Mary Ellis's couch remained unpressed, and the rising sun shone in at the window upon her glossy hair where she crouched down beside her bed.

It was a movement in the adjoining room which roused her from the heavy stupor into which she had fallen, for it could hardly be called a natural sleep, and she started up to look round as if feeling guilty of some lapse of duty.

For a few minutes she suffered from a strange feeling of confusion accompanied by depression. Then by degrees the incidents of the past night came clearly to her mind, and she recalled how she had sunk down by her bed to pray for help and patience, and that the terrible affliction might be lightened for him she loved, and then all had become blank.

A few minutes before Mary's face had looked wan and pale, now it was suffused by a warm glow that was not that of the ruddy early morning sun. For the hope had risen strongly in her breast that, in spite of all, the terrible affliction would be lightened, and by her.

Chapter Seventeen.

Four days elapsed, and Mrs Ellis noticed a change in her child. Mary had been more than usually attentive to her father, and James Ellis had noticed and looked pleased.

"'Tis going off, mother," he said one evening. "Of course it hit very hard at the time, poor little lass, for she felt very fond of him, I suppose; but I always said to myself that time would heal the sore place, and, bless her, it is doing it. You've noticed how much brighter she seems?"

"Yes, I've noticed," said Mrs Ellis, nodding her head as she prepared the supper. "She was actually singing gently to herself this morning over her work, just as she used to, and you don't know, James dear, what a lot of good it did me."

"Oh, yes, I do—oh, yes, I do," said the bailiff, nodding his head. "Of course it would, mother."

"Yes, dear, it did, for it has been cruel work for me to see her going about the house in that heart-breaking way."

"Humph! Of course, and for me too."

"No, James, you're at home so little. You have your meals and sit with me of an evening, and at such times there's something going on to make the poor dear busy. But as soon as you're out of sight it has been dreadful again. I've seen a deal more of her poor heart-breaking than you have, and there have been times when—"

"Heart-breaking! Stuff and nonsense!" cried James Ellis petulantly.

"Ah, you don't know," said his wife, shaking her head at him sadly.

"Don't know what, you silly woman? There, that sounds like heart-breaking, doesn't it?"

For at that moment, plainly heard, came the sound of Mary's voice singing the old English song, "Robin Adair"; and as the notes reached his ear, James Ellis smiled, held his head on one side, swayed it to the melody, and began softly to hum over the plaintive tune.

"*Rob—in—er—her—dair,*" sang James Ellis. "Well done, little lassie! Talk about a voice, mother, why it's as sweet as a bird's."

"Yes, dear, but I wish she wouldn't sing such sad things—it puts me in mind of the robins in the autumn time."

"I wish you wouldn't be so melancholy, mother. You're enough to put a whole regiment of soldiers out of spirits, let alone a poor girl. Here, hold your tongue now. Here she comes."

Footsteps were heard upon the stairs, and the foot was more springy than it had been of late, as Mary entered the room.

"Ready for supper, father dear?" said Mary, going behind his chair, placing her arms about his neck, and drawing his head back so that she could lay her cheek against his forehead.

"Ready, my pet? Of course I am;" and "*Rob—in—er—her—dair*," he sang. "That's the way. I'm glad to hear you tune up a bit. It's like the birds in spring corn: and mother wants it, for of all the melancholy old women that ever lived, she's about the worst."

Click!

"Hallo! Who's that at the gate? Just look, dear."

Mary went to the window, but there was no need, for she knew the step; and as her mother glanced at her, she saw the girl's face harden as she said—

"Mr Barnett, father."

"Humph! What does he want to-night?" muttered Ellis. "Let him in, my dear; and, Mary, my girl, don't run away out of the room."

Mary was silent, and a tapping came at the door, evidently administered by the head of a stick.

"Evening, Miss Mary," said the visitor briskly. "Nice growing weather. Father at home?"

"Yes, I'm at home. Want me, Daniel Barnett?"

"Well, yes, Mr Ellis, sir, there's a little bit o' business I want to see you about. I ought to have asked you this morning and down at the gardens, but somehow I've always got such a lot of things on my mind there that a lot of 'em slip out again."

"Come in then, come in then," said Ellis.

"Not if it's disturbing you, sir," protested the visitor. "Say the word, and I'll go and come up another evening. I don't mind a walk, Miss Mary," he added, in a confidential way.

"Business, business, Daniel Barnett! And there's nothing like getting it over," said Ellis, as, after a good deal of preliminary shoe-rubbing, Barnett stepped to the door of the sitting-room, and then stopped short in a very apologetic way.

"Why, you're just going to supper. I'd best come up to-morrow night."

James Ellis felt in the best of humours, and he smiled.

"Well," he said, "if you come to-morrow evening, I suppose I shall have some supper then. Sit down, man, and out with it."

"Oh, thank you, Mr Ellis, and with many apologies to you, Mrs Ellis, ma'am, and to you too, Miss Mary."

"Why, hallo! Daniel Barnett. Been to the bookseller's lately?"

"Eh? No, sir, I haven't been to the town for a fortnight past," said Barnett wonderingly.

"Oh," said the bailiff, with a knowing look at his wife and daughter; "I thought perhaps you'd bought and been studying up *Etiquette for Gentlemen*."

"No, no, sir! Ha, ha, ha! That's a good one, Mr Ellis. Oh, no, sir, I'm only a rough one, and what I know of etiquetty came up natural like—like—"

"Mushrooms?"

"That's a good one too!" cried Barnett, with forced gaiety. "He's having his little joke at me, Miss Mary."

"There, never mind them," said the bailiff, "let's have the business and get it over. What is it?"

"Of course, sir. It won't take long."

"Shall we go in the kitchen, James?" said Mrs Ellis.

"Eh, ma'am?" cried the young man eagerly. "Oh, no, pray don't let me drive you away, it's only garden business."

"They're not going," said Ellis, half jocularly. "Now then, what is it, my lad?"

"Well, it's about the gravel paths, Mr Ellis," said the young man, leaning forward, after wiping his damp forehead, and speaking confidentially. "I'm getting a bit anxious about them."

"Glad to hear it, my lad. I was always proud o' my paths in the old days."

"And so am I, sir. If the gravel paths in a garden's kept right there isn't so very much the matter."

"Humph! Well, I don't go so far as that, Daniel Barnett, but paths go a long way. So you're ashamed of their being so weedy, eh?"

"Weedy, sir," said the young man, flushing.

"Why those paths— Oh, I see! Ha ha! He's chaffing me again, Miss Mary."

Mary did not even smile, and the visitor looked uncomfortable, his own face growing serious again directly.

"It's a long time since they've been regravelled, Mr Ellis, sir, and as I could spare a bit of time, I thought, if you were not much pressed up at the farm, you might let me have a hundred loads of gravel carted from the pit."

"Take a lot of time and very hard work for the horses," said the bailiff, pursing up his lips.

"Yes, sir, I calculated all that, but it would be a wonderful improvement to my paths, and they'd pay for doing."

"I don't want to spare the carts, Daniel Barnett; but I agree with you it would be a great improvement, and I want Mrs Mostyn to feel that you are doing justice to the place, so I suppose I must say yes."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," cried Barnett, for he could feel the strength of the encouragement, and knew how much it meant. "There," he continued, rising very slowly and glancing at mother and daughter as he spoke, "I'll start two men picking up the big path, and I s'pose you'll be sending down the gravel almost any time."

"They shall begin soon and get it over."

"Thank you, sir; then I'll say good-night now. Good-night, Mrs Ellis. Good-night, Miss Mary."

"What, won't you stop and have a bit of supper with us, Daniel?" said the bailiff.

Wouldn't he! And "Daniel" too! He dropped down into his chair muttering something about its being very kind, and that he thought he wouldn't mind a morsel, but he looked in vain for a welcoming smile from Mary, who, without a word, slowly left the room, and returned as silently as she went, but with fresh knives and forks, and a couple more plates.

"But she didn't put 'em next to hers," thought Daniel Barnett, most unreasonably, for there was the whole opposite side of the table at liberty, and she laid a place for him there.

It was of course what he had been looking for. He had come expecting to be asked to stay, and as soon as they were all seated he told himself that it was all right, and he stared hard at the gentle face across the table and started various topics of conversation, directed at Mary, her father good-humouredly helping him with a word now and then, while Mrs Ellis looked on and attended to the wants of her guest.

"Yes, she's coming round at last," thought Daniel Barnett; for, whenever she was addressed, Mary replied in a quiet, gentle way, and once entered into the conversation with some word of animation, making the bailiff look across the table at his wife, and give her a nod, as much as to say—

"Now then, who's broken-hearted now?"

But Mrs Ellis only tightened her lips and said to herself—

"Yes, it's all very well; but fathers don't understand their girls like mothers do. Women know how to read women and men don't, and never will—that's my humble opinion about that—and I wish Daniel Barnett would go—"

Daniel Barnett was a clever fellow, but like many sharp men he could be too much so sometimes. Metaphorically, he was one of those men who disdained the use of stirrups for mounting a horse, and liked to vault into the saddle, which he could do with ease and grace, but sometimes he would, in his efforts to show

off, over-leap himself—vaulting ambition fashion—and come down heavily on the other side.

He performed that feat on the present occasion at supper, for, in his blundering way, now that circumstances had occurred which made him feel pretty safe, he thought it would be good form to show Mary what a fine, magnanimous side there was in his character, and how, far from looking upon John Grange as a possible rival, he treated him as a poor, unfortunate being, for whom he could feel nothing but pity.

"Rather strange business, wasn't it, about poor Grange, Mr Ellis, eh?"

Mary started. Mrs Ellis thrust her hand beneath the table-cloth to give her daughter's dress a twitch, and Ellis frowned and uttered a kind of grunt, which might have meant anything.

Any one else would have known by the silence that he had touched dangerous ground. Daniel Barnett felt that it was an opportunity for him to speak.

"I am very sorry for the poor fellow," he said; "it seems so sad, but it is no more than I expected."

Mary turned white and cold.

"You don't know where he has gone, Mr Ellis?"

"No," said the bailiff shortly.

"No; I thought you said so. Poor chap! I did everything I could to make matters easy for him, and selected little jobs that I thought he could do; but, of course, he would not take to them happily. He felt it hard to have to take his orders from me, and very naturally, for he expected to be head-gardener, and would have been, eh, Mr Ellis?"

"Yes," grunted the bailiff.

"To be sure he would. I'm not such a donkey as to suppose I should have got the place if he had been all right. I'm a good gardener, though I say it as shouldn't say it, Miss Mary; but there were lots of little dodges about flowers where he could beat me hollow. Ha, ha, ha!" he laughed, "I wouldn't say that before the men, but I don't mind here."

"Is Mr Grange bad again?" asked Mrs Ellis, unable to restrain her curiosity.

"Bad, ma'am? Well, of course he's bad; but no worse than usual. You know, I suppose, that he's gone away?"

"I? No."

"Oh, yes, quite mysterious like; never said good-bye to a soul."

"But me," thought Mary, with a sensation as of something clutching her heart, as she recalled that night at her bedroom window.

"Yes, poor fellow, he's gone," said Ellis, who felt that it was time to speak.

"Of course I know why," said Barnett, "it was too much for him. He was fretting his heart out, poor chap, and he no doubt thought it was the best he could do—get right away you know, where he wasn't known, and where everything he saw—I mean everything he touched—didn't remind him of the old place. It's all very sad, and it used to make me feel uncomfortable, and keep away for fear of making him think of my superseding him; but there, we're all like plants and flowers, Miss Mary, and suffer from our blights and east winds."

He looked across at Mary, whose face was stony, and her eyes fixed upon him so strangely that he felt abashed, and turned to Mrs Ellis.

"Sad business, ma'am, from the beginning," he said; "but, as the saying is, we don't know, and perhaps it's all for the best."

Mrs Ellis sighed, the supper was at an end; and to the great relief of all, Barnett rose, and in a tone of voice which suggested that every one had been pressing him very hard to stay longer, he cried—

"Well, really, I must go now."

Mrs Ellis said meekly, "Must you, Mr Barnett?" and held out her hand promptly.

He shook hands with her quite affectionately, and then turned to Mary, who let him take her hand more than gave it, and he sighed as he said "Good-night."

"You'll think about the gravel, Mr Ellis?" he said to his host. "I want that garden to look better than any one in the county."

"Yes, you shall have it, Barnett, first time I can spare the horses at the farm. And I'll go down to the gate with you." They walked not only to the gate, but a couple of hundred yards towards the gardens before either spoke, and then just as Barnett was congratulating himself upon how well he had got on at the cottage that night, Ellis turned to him sharply.

"I told Mrs Mostyn about John Grange having gone away so suddenly."

"Did you, sir? What did she say?"

"That she didn't want to hear his name mentioned again, for she had been disappointed in the man."

"Poor chap!" said Barnett sadly.

"Yes, poor chap!" said Ellis hastily. "For Heaven's sake don't ever hint at such a thing at home, Daniel, but I've a horrible thought of something being wrong about that poor fellow. You don't think that, quite out of heart and in despair like, he has gone and done anything rash, do you?"

"Well, Mr Ellis, I didn't like to hint at such a thing to any one, but as you do think like that, and as old Tummus and his wife seem to be quite suspicious like, it did set me thinking, and I've felt sometimes that he must have walked two miles the other night to the river, and then gone in."

"By accident?" said Ellis quietly, "in his blindness."

"Ah!" said Barnett solemnly, "that's more than I can tell."

"Or must tell," said Ellis excitedly. "It mustn't even be breathed, Dan Barnett. If my Mary even heard it whispered, she'd go melancholy mad."

Chapter Eighteen.

"Nay, sir, I don't know any more about it, and I arn't a-going to say nowt about it, but if that there poor bairn—"

"What poor bairn?" said James Ellis angrily, as he stood in the keeping-room of old Tummus's cottage. "I was asking you about John Grange."

"Well, I know you were. Arn't he quite a bairn to me?"

"Please don't be cross with him, Mr Ellis, sir," said old Hannah respectfully; "it's only his way, sir."

"Very well, let him go on," cried James Ellis testily.

"Just you keep your spoon out o' the broth, mother," grumbled old Tummus, "I know what I'm about."

"Well, what was it you were going to say?" asked the bailiff.

"I were going to say as I wouldn't say nowt about it, and I won't, but that poor lad has either been made away wi—"

"Tut, tut, nonsense!"

"Well, then, he's made away wi' himself," cried old Tummus, bringing his hand down upon the table with a heavy bang.

The bailiff, who had not removed his hat before now, took it off, showing a heavy dew upon his forehead, which he wiped away as he looked uneasily from one to the other.

"What—what makes you say that, Tummus?" murmured Ellis, who did not seem to be himself at all.

"Now, Tummus, do mind what you're saying," said old Hannah, in a lachrymose tone of voice.

"Well, I am, arn't I? What I say is this: Warn't it likely?"

"Likely?"

"Aye, likely. Here's the poor lad loses his sight all at once just when he's getting on and going to be head-gardener and marry my pretty bairn."

"Nothing of the sort, sir," cried the bailiff warmly. "You're too fond of settling other people's business."

"Yes, Mr Ellis, sir, that's what I tell him," said old Hannah anxiously.

"Tchah!" growled old Tummus, giving his body a jerk. "Very well then, sir, he thowt he were, and it got on his mind like that he were all in the darkness, and it's my belief as he couldn't bear it, and went and made a hole in the water so as to be out of his misery."

"Oh, Tummus, you shouldn't!"

"No, no; he was not the man to do such a thing," said Ellis, whose voice sounded husky, and who looked limp and not himself.

"I dunno," growled Tummus; "they say when a man's in love and can't get matters settled, he's ready to do owt. I never weer in love, so I doan't know for sure."

"Oh, Tummus!" cried old Hannah reproachfully.

"Will ta howd thee tongue?" cried the old man.

"No, I won't, Tummus. Not even with Mr Ellis here, if you stand there telling such wicked stories."

"Arn't a story," cried the old man, with the twinkle of a grim smile at the corners of his lips. "Who'd ever go and fall in love with an ugly owd woman like thou?"

"It couldn't be that; no, no, it couldn't be that," said the bailiff hastily.

"Wheer is he then, sir?" said old Tummus firmly.

"Gone away for a bit—perhaps to London."

"Nay, not he," said old Tummus, shaking his head, "I'm sewer o' that."

"Why, how do you know?"

"Would a smart young man like John Grange was ha' gone up to London without takking a clean shirt wi' him?"

"What!"

"Didn't take no clean shirt nor stoggins nor nowt."

"Are you sure of that?" said the bailiff.

"I couldn't make out that anything was gone out of his room, sir," said old Hannah, clapping her apron to her eyes. "Poor dear: it's very, very sad."

"Aye, it's sad enough," said old Tummus; "not as it matters much, what's the good o' going on living?"

"Tummus!" cried his wife.

"Well, what are yow shoutin' at? I say it again: What's the good o' livin'? You on'y get horrid owd, and your missus allus naggin' you at home, and your Dan Barnetts shoutin' at you in the garden, or else Master Ellis here giving it to you about something."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tummus," said his wife. "To go and say such a thing to Mr Ellis's face, as has allus been a kind friend to you."

"Aye, lass, I don't grumble much at he, but we'm do grow precious owd."

"And a great blessing too, Tummus," cried his wife. "You don't hear Mr Ellis complain about getting old."

"Nay, but then he's got a pretty bairn, bless her!—as sweet and good a lass as ever stepped; and I says that to Master Ellis's face, same as I've often said it behind his back. Bless her! There!"

James Ellis, with the great care upon his breast—the haunting thought that perhaps, after all, he had had something to do with John Grange's disappearance—now stood in old Tummus's cottage a different being. There was none of the rather pompous, important manner that he was in the habit of putting on when addressing his inferiors. The faces of John Grange and Mary seemed to rise before him reproachfully, and, for the first time in his life, he stood before the old couple in the cottage a humbled man, hardly conscious of what was being said.

"Then he took nothing away with him, Hannah?" he said at last.

"No, sir, nothing that I can make out."

"Nowt!" said old Tummus. "Here he were, hevving his tea that night, looking that down sad, that a bad tater was nowt to him; next thing is as we hears him go out o' the door—that there

door just behind wheer you're a-standing, Mr Ellis, sir, and he didn't come back."

"Didn't come back," said the bailiff, repeating the old man's words.

"We didn't set up for him because we know'd he'd shut oop all right, and if he didn't nobody wouldn't come and steal our plate, 'cause the owd woman allus taks it to bed wi' her."

"Tummus!"

"Well, so you do; six silver teaspoons, on'y one was lost years ago, and the sugar bows, sir, she allus wrops 'em up in an owd pocky ankychy."

"There is no water near," said James Ellis, as if to himself, but old Tummus's ears were sharp enough.

"There's the river."

"Two miles away, Tummus."

"What's two miles to a man who wants to drownd hissen! Why, if I wanted to mak' a hole in the watter I'd walk twenty."

"Tummus, I will not have you say such dreadful things."

"It's very, very sad, Hannah," said James Ellis at last; "and I'm more upset about it than I can say, for he was a fine, worthy young fellow, and as good a gardener as ever stepped."

"That he was," murmured the old couple.

"But we don't know that anything so terrible has happened. Some day perhaps we shall be hearing news of him."

"Nay, you never hear news o' them as has gone before, Master Ellis, sir. If I were you, I'd have the pond dragged up at the farm, and watter dreened off at Jagley's mill."

"No, no," cried the bailiff hastily. "There is no reason for suspecting such a thing. John Grange was not the man to go and do anything rash. There, I thought I'd come and have a few words with you, Hannah, and you too, Tummus. I want you' to hold your tongues, now, and to let this sad business die a natural death. You understand?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Chatter grows into bad news sometimes. There, good-evening. I dare say you'll hear news about the poor fellow some day."

"Nay, we wean't," said old Tummus, when the bailiff was gone. "John Grange is as dead as a door-nail, and owd Jemmy Ellis knows it too; but he's scarred of his bairn hearing, and don't want the missus up at the house to think on it."

"But we don't know that he is dead," said old Hannah.

"Not for sewer," growled old Tummus, beginning to take off his heavy boots; "and we arn't sewer of a many things. But then, owd Jimmy's as good as master here, and if you go flying in his face you may just as well fly over the garden wall same time. I've done, missus. I don't say who done it, but it's my belief John Grange was put out o' the way."

"Oh, don't, Tummus; you give me the creeps."

"All right, all right, I've done. It's a rum world, and everything goes wrong in it."

"Not quite everything, dear."

"Well, no, not quite everything, but nearly. I believe it's because it was made round. Lookye here, missus: how can matters go right on a thing as has got no sound bottom to stand on? If the world had been made square it would have stood square, and things would have come right; but there it is all round and never keeping steady, and allus changing. Why, if you get a fine day you never can count upon another."

"No," sighed Hannah; "but there's a deal of good in the world, after all."

"Eh? What?" cried old Tummus, jumping up and standing upon the patchwork hearthrug in his stockings, "wheerabouts?—wheer is it, owd woman? I'm a-going to look for it 'fore I gets a day owder."

"Sit down, and don't talk such stuff, Tummus," cried the old woman, giving him a push which sent him back in his chair. "I won't have it."

"Ah! That's it," he said, with a low, chuckling laugh; "it's because the world's round. If it had been square we should all

have stood solid, and old women wouldn't ha' flown at their mesters and knocked 'em down."

Chapter Nineteen.

Old Tummus and his wife both declared that they minded what the bailiff said, and never let a word escape from them about the old man's suspicions; but rumour is a sad spreader of news, and the result of some bit of tittle-tattle turns up in places least expected, doing incalculable harm.

It was not likely that John Grange's disappearance would die out of ordinary conversation without being pretty well embroidered by people's imagination, and like the Three Black Crows of the old story, being added to until the origin looked very trifling and small. But all the same, it was some time before people's doubts reached Mrs Mostyn's ears through her housekeeper, and she turned upon her old confidential servant with a look of horror.

"Oh, my good woman!" she cried, "don't tell me that: it can't be true."

The housekeeper shook her head.

"I hope not, ma'am; but it has grown to be common talk."

"Why, if it really were so, I could never live happily in the old place again. Go away, and send some one to fetch James Ellis here, directly."

The bailiff came in due course; and as soon as he entered the drawing-room, where his mistress's face plainly showed that something was very wrong, she saluted him with—

"What's all this I hear about that poor young man?"

"Well, ma'am, I—"

"Ah, no hesitation, James Ellis. I want the precise facts. Is it true that he made away with himself?"

"That nobody can say, ma'am," said James Ellis firmly. "There has been some tattle of that kind."

"And you think that he did?"

"I try not to, ma'am," said the bailiff, "for everybody's sake. It would be terrible." Mrs Mostyn was silent. "Thank you, Ellis," she said, after a few minutes of awful silence; "it would indeed be terrible. But ought some search to be made? Is it my duty to have representations made to the police?"

"I think not now, ma'am. I did not like to give any encouragement to the rumour, for, after all, it is only a rumour."

"But where there's smoke there's fire, James Ellis."

"Yes, ma'am," said the bailiff sagely; "but people often see what they think is smoke, and it turns out to be only a vapour which dies away in the sunshine."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs Mostyn thoughtfully.

"I have gone into the matter a good deal, ma'am, I hope, as an honest man."

"I am sure of that, James Ellis," said his mistress.

"And for two reasons I have tried to think I was right in taking no steps about what may, after all, be all a fancy at which we have jumped."

"And what were the reasons, James Ellis?"

"One was, ma'am, that I knew it would be a great pain and trouble to my employer."

Mrs Mostyn bent her head.

"And the other?"

"Well, ma'am, to speak plainly, there was a little bit of leaning on the part of my Mary towards poor John Grange, and there's no doubt he was very fond of her."

"Ah! This is news to me. And you and Mrs Ellis?"

"These things come about, ma'am, without fathers and mothers having anything to do with them till too late."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs Mostyn thoughtfully.

"But when John Grange's bad accident happened, of course I had to put down my foot firmly, and say it could not be."

"It seems very hard, James Ellis," sighed his mistress; "but I suppose it was right." Then she added quickly: "You are afraid of the poor girl hearing such a rumour?"

"More than that, ma'am," said the bailiff huskily; "I'm afraid it would kill her, or send her melancholy mad."

Mrs Mostyn heaved a deep sigh, and remained silent.

"Do you think it was my duty to have spoken to the police, ma'am, and told them I suspected the poor fellow made an end of himself?"

"James Ellis," said Mrs Mostyn gravely, "you are Mary's father, and love your child."

"She is my one great comfort in life, ma'am."

"Yes; and I am a weak woman, full of sympathy for one of my sex. I will not trust myself to judge in one way or the other. Let the matter rest for a time, and let us see what that brings forth."

"Yes," said James Ellis, as he went back home; "let us see what time brings forth."

Time brought the rumour sooner than James Ellis suspected, for while he was having his interview with Mrs Mostyn, the story had floated to the cottage, where Mary heard it whispered to her mother that John Grange had wandered away from his lodgings one night, and, either by accident from his blindness, or in despair on account of his affliction, he had walked into the river, or some pool, and been drowned; for though plenty of inquiries had been made, he had not since been seen.

"Good-bye—good-bye for ever." Those words she had heard that night as she sat at the window: his farewell to her; and it seemed to come home to her like a stroke of lightning, that in his despair he had rashly sought the end.

She said nothing. There was no wild cry of horror: only a sudden motion of her hands towards her bosom, where she held them pressed; and they saw her face turn of a deathly white, even to her lips, as the blood flew to her heart. Then she uttered a low sigh and sank down in a chair, where she was still

seated, gazing vacantly before her into the future, when her father returned and flew to her side.

He looked at his wife without speaking, but his eyes said plainly, "You have heard?" and Mrs Ellis bowed her head.

"Mary, my darling," the old man whispered, as he caught her to his heart. And at this she uttered a faint cry, and hid her poor white face upon her hands.

"We can do nothing, mother," whispered Ellis. "Let her rest. Time is the only cure for this. I tried to hide it, but I knew it must come at last, and it has come."

"Good-bye—good-bye for ever," murmured Mary, almost in a whisper; and her words sent a chill through both their breasts.

Chapter Twenty.

From that hour they saw the poor girl droop and begin to fade like some flower stricken by blight. No murmur escaped her lips, and John Grange's name was never mentioned. But it was noted at home that she appeared to be more gently affectionate to those about her, and anxious to please her father, while many a time poor Mrs Ellis told her husband that she was sure "our Mary" was slowly sinking into the grave.

"Wait a bit, wife—wait a bit," he would reply testily. "It's quite natural. You'll see it will pass off, and she'll forget."

"Never, James."

"Well, then, it will become softened down as time goes on; she's gentler towards Daniel Barnett, too, now. There: it will all come right in the end."

Mrs Ellis sighed and shook her head, but all the same she thought that after all her husband might prove to be correct.

"For James is a very wise man," she argued, "and one can't go on mourning for ever, however much one may have loved."

Daniel Barnett placed his own interpretation on Mary's manner towards him, and there were times when he was exulted, and felt how successfully he had climbed up the ladder of life. Head-gardener at Mrs Mostyn's by eight-and-twenty; James Ellis's

prospective son-in-law; and in the future he would be bailiff and agent, when Ellis was removed by infirmity or death; and in the latter case he and Mary, the only child, would inherit the nice little bit of money the old man had saved, and the six cottages which he had bought from time to time.

Very pleasant all this, joined to the success in the gardens, where Mrs Mostyn had begun to show him more favour, and had several times expressed great satisfaction at the state of her garden.

But Daniel Barnett was not happy. He was perfectly sure that Mary would some day yield to his and her mother's wishes, and become his wife; but even that knowledge did not clear away the black cloud which overhung his life. For, sleeping or waking, he could not get rid of the feeling that John Grange's remains would some day be discovered, and conscience troubled him with the idea that he was more or less to blame for the poor fellow's untimely end. It was in vain that he indignantly protested to himself that it was not likely a man should risk his life if he could help it. That he was not bound to climb that tree, and that he did quite right to take care of himself, and so escape what might have been his fate. "I might have fallen, and turned blind, or might have been killed," he would often say to himself. "It was a bit of luck for me—ill-luck for him, poor chap. He went, and there's an end of it."

But there was not "an end of it," for Daniel Barnett's life was made a misery to him by the thoughts of how Grange had suffered, and how he had treated him, till in despair—

"Yes; that's it," Tummus would whisper to him; "he went and walked into the river, or—"

Daniel Barnett shivered and avoided the big well in the garden, and stubbornly refused to have the two great underground rain-water tanks cleaned out in the dry time for fear of some revelation being made.

In his own mind he grew more and more sure that John Grange had taken his life, but he said nothing, and though affectionately amiable to his friends up at the cottage, he daily grew more morose to those beneath him in the gardens, and made their lives as great a burden as his own was to him.

Troubles of this kind go on for a long time before they reach the employer's ears. James Ellis heard that there were complaints of Barnett's tyrannical treatment, and threats on the part of the

men to leave; but he saw that the garden was admirably kept and sided with the head, refusing to listen to the murmurs which grew deep now instead of loud.

The months had glided by, and it was autumn once more, with the fruit ripening fast in the garden, and, save to Mary Ellis, the sad episode of John Grange's career had grown fainter and fainter in the memories of those who had known him.

Barnett had long ceased to wait for invitations, and quite three times a week used to go up to the cottage and stay late, while at the house he was often joked and questioned as to when it was coming off, whereupon he would smile and look knowing, while all the time there was a bitter gnawing at his heart, for he knew that he was no nearer winning Mary than he was the year before when John Grange disappeared.

Then came a sharp little encounter, one bright September day in the garden, where, after his wont, old Tummus had been to what he called "torment them there weeds," to wit, chopping and tearing them up with his hoe, and leaving them to shrink and die.

The *Bon Chrétians* were particularly fine that year, and one which had become worm-eaten, and had in consequence prematurely ripened, showing all the bright tints of its kind, had fallen and lay ready to rot, when, hoeing away, old Tummus saw it, smiled to himself as he thought how it would please old Hannah, picked it up and laid it aside ready to take up to the bothy when he put on his coat at dinner-time.

"I shall have to ask him for it," muttered the old man, "or else there'll be a row."

Just at that moment, as luck had it, Mrs Mostyn came along, with scissors and basket, to cut a few dahlias, and, in obedience to a sudden thought, old Tummus raised the fruit by the stalk and stepped toward his mistress, offering her the pear.

"Strange nyste pear, mum," he said.

"And ripe so soon. There, lay it in the basket. Ah! Tut, tut! It's all worm-eaten; take it away, and give it to somebody who will not mind."

Mrs Mostyn went on, and old Tummus chuckled, and hid the pear just as Daniel Barnett caught sight of him, and having marked the spot, waited till the old man had gone away. He

then searched for, found the pear, and leaving it untouched, quietly watched at dinner-time, saw old Tummus secure the treasure, pocket it, and he was going off when Barnett accosted him with—

“What have you got there?”

“Pear,” said the old man stubbornly, as Barnett tried to snatch it from his pocket.

“Now I know where the fruit goes. Why, you thieving old scoundrel. I’ll soon put an end to this.”

“Scoundrel yourself!” cried the old man fiercely. “Smart a man as you are, Dan Barnett. I never set myself to steal another man’s love and harassed him till he went and drowned himself, if you didn’t go behind and throw him into the tank you won’t have cleaned.”

“Why, you lying old villain!” roared Barnett.

“Lying, eh?” retorted old Tummus; “it’s a lie then that you shoved they orchards off the shelf, I s’pose, and made believe it was poor John Grange. A lie, perhaps, as you laid the scythe for the poor blind man to walk on and cut himself.”

“Yes, a lie,” cried Barnett, turning white.

“Then you tell it, for I see you do it, I did, and saved him from crippling himself for life. But we’ve had enough o’ this. I goes straight to Missus Mostyn and tells her all I know.”

“Mrs Mostyn is here, sir,” said a sharp, stern voice, “and has heard all you have said.”

Chapter Twenty One.

In the scene which followed, when the two men saw their mistress standing before them, that lady acted the part of judge.

“I told the old man he might take the pear,” she said to Daniel Barnett sternly. “But you, sir,” she cried, turning upon old Tummus, “how dare you make such horrible charges against my gardener?”

"Begging your pardon, my lady, Mrs Mostyn," said old Tummus, "I'm as much your gardener as Dan Barnett, mum. What I says I sticks to. He was allus agin' poor John Grange, and if he arn't made an end on him, what I says is this here—wheer is he?"

Mrs Mostyn for answer pointed to the gate.

"Go," she said quietly, "you do not know what you are saying. When you are ready to apologise to Mr Barnett for what you have said, come to me. Till then you had better stay away from the grounds."

Old Tummus raised the mellow pear, which he still held in his pocket, dashed it with all his might upon the ground, and then stumped away with head erect.

Mrs Mostyn stood watching the old man for a few moments, and then turned to Barnett.

"You were nearly as much in fault as he," she said sternly. "I do not approve of my servants, even if they are in fault, being addressed in such a tone."

Mrs Mostyn walked away, and Daniel Barnett abstained from visiting at the cottage that night.

A week later old Tummus was reinstated without apologising to the head-gardener, after old Hannah had been up to the house and begged him on.

"No, ma'am," she said, through her tears; "he hasn't 'pologised, and he says he can't, because it's all true."

"Then it is sheer obstinacy, Hannah," said Mrs Mostyn.

"Yes, mum, that's just what it is. Many's the time his mother's told me that he was the obstintest boy that ever lived, and well I know it. Once he's said a thing, wild horses couldn't make him alter it. And you see he's seventy-five now, ma'am, and been sixty-three years in these gardens. He's been growing obstin't' all this time, and I'm afraid you can't change him now. Please, please, let him come back to work, mum; you'll kill him if you don't."

"There, go away with you, you stupid woman, and tell him I'm very very angry with him for a careless, obstinate, wicked old man, and I don't forgive him a bit; but he may come back to

work, and you can ask the housekeeper to give you half-a-pound of tea as you go."

Old Hannah went away, sobbing aloud, and so overcome that, in spite of the hot water which bedewed her cheeks, she forgot all about the tea.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Another six months had passed, and it was spring again, with its bright promises of renewing life and sunshine, when, one evening, Mrs Ellis sat holding her child's hand, the tears stealing slowly down her cheeks as she talked in a low voice, stifling a sob from time to time, and in every way showing how bad an ambassadress she was, and how thoroughly her sympathies were with her child.

"Did father tell you to say this, mother?" said Mary wearily.

"Yes, my darling. He says he is getting older, and that it is the one wish of his heart to see you happy."

"But he would not see me happy, mother, if I said Yes," replied Mary. "I cannot, indeed, I cannot love Daniel Barnett. I could never make him a good wife. Why will he persecute me so?"

"Because he loves you, dear; and don't, pray don't be hasty! You don't know: the love may come, dear."

"Yes, mother; the love may come, but will it?"

"See how good and patient he has been; and father says it is his sole care to see you settled, and to know that if anything happens to him you have a strong right hand to protect you. Come, darling, let me go down and tell them both that you have thought better of it, and that you consent."

"Mother, you do not wish it," said Mary gently. "All this does not come from the heart."

"I think it does, my darling," said Mrs Ellis. "You see, it is my duty to do what your father wishes. Yours to love and obey him."

"No, mother dear," said Mary gently. "Your voice contradicts it all. This does not come from your heart. You do not wish to see me Daniel Barnett's wife."

Mrs Ellis's face went down on her child's breast, and she let her tears have their course for a few minutes, but raised her head again with a sigh.

"I oughtn't to have done that," she said hurriedly. "Mary, my darling, your father desires it, and it is, indeed it is, your duty to try and meet his wishes. What am I to go down and say?"

"Go and tell him that I cannot forget the past, mother, and tell Mr Barnett to wait. In a few months I will try to think, as you all wish me, if—if I live."

"Oh, my darling, my darling," sobbed the mother.

"Don't cry, dear," said Mary calmly. "I can't help feeling like that sometimes, it is when I think that he must be dead, and then hope comes, and—mother," she whispered, "do you believe in dreams?"

"My darling, no," said Mrs Ellis, "only that they are the result of thinking too much during the day of some particular thing. But I must go down to them now, dear. Father will be so impatient. He was angry last time Daniel came here, because you would keep up-stairs."

"Daniel!" said Mary sadly. "Mother, are you beginning to side against me too?"

Mary Ellis had hardly asked these words when the sound of voices below made her spring to her feet, run to the door, and stand there listening.

"Mary, my child, what is it?" cried Mrs Ellis.

For answer Mary ran down into the little parlour.

"John!" she cried wildly, and the next moment she was clinging to John Grange's neck, while he stood there with one arm about her, holding her tightly to him, and proudly facing her father and Barnett, who stood scowling and trying hard to speak.

Chapter Twenty Three.

In the dead silence which fell upon all in the bailiff's room when Mary Ellis flung herself upon John Grange's neck, a looker-on might have counted sixty beats of the pendulum which swung to and fro in the old oak-cased "grandfather's clock," before another word was uttered.

Mrs Ellis stood with her face working, as if premonitory to bursting out into a fit of sobbing; James Ellis felt something rising in his throat, and looked on with a grim kind of jealous pleasure at the lovers' embrace; and Barnett broke the silence by making a strange grinding noise with his teeth.

"Do you—are you going to allow this?" he panted out at last.

James Ellis made a deprecating gesture with his hands, and looked uneasily at his wife, who had crossed to Grange, laid her hands upon his shoulder, and said gently—

"And we thought you were dead—we thought you were dead."

"As I should have been, Mrs Ellis, to you all," cried the young man proudly, "if I could not have come back to you like this."

By this time Barnett had fully recovered the speech of which jealous rage and disappointment had nearly deprived him, and after a savage scowl at Grange, he turned upon the bailiff.

"Look here, Mr Ellis, is this your house? Are you master here?"

Ellis made an angry gesture now.

"My good sir," he cried; "you see: what can I do?"

"Order this fellow—this beggar—this impostor out. He has no business here."

Mary turned upon him fiercely, but her angry look faded out, and gave place to a smile of content, as she now linked her hands together about Grange's strong right arm and looked gently in his face, as if to say, "Don't be angry, he hardly knows what he says."

Maddened more by this, Barnett stepped forward to separate them, but, roused now in turn, James Ellis stepped between.

"Yes," he said firmly; "this is my house, and I am master here, Daniel Barnett. No violence, if you please."

"As much violence as is necessary to turn this fellow out," roared the young man. "I claim your promise, my rights. Mary, you are by your father's words my affianced wife; keep away from that man. Mrs Ellis, stand aside, or I will not be answerable for the consequences. You coward!" he cried to Grange; "you screen yourself between two women. Now then, out with you!"

One moment John Grange had been standing there calm and happy, with the women clinging to him; the next, by a quick movement, strong yet gentle, he had shaken himself free; and as Barnett seized him by the throat to eject him from the room, he was perfectly transformed. For, with almost superhuman strength, he seized his rival in return, quickly bore him back a step or two, and then wrenched his legs from beneath him, bringing him to his knees.

"It is you who are the coward," he cried in a deep voice, "or you would not have forced on this before two helpless women. Mr Ellis, I claim Mary by the ties of our old and faithful love. I, John Grange, thanks to God, strong, hale, keen of sight again as once I was, a man who can and will protect her while I live. Now, sir, open that door. If there is to be a struggle between us two, it will not take place here."

"John!"

That one word in a tone of appeal from Mary, and he dropped his hands.

"Yes," he said, with the calm assurance of a man who valued his strength; "you are right, dear, Daniel Barnett was half mad. That will do, sir. It is Mary's wish that you should go, and Mr Ellis will not refuse me a hearing when his child's happiness is at stake."

Barnett rose slowly, looking from one to the other, and finally his eyes rested upon Ellis, who nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said, "you'd better go, Daniel Barnett. I should not be doing my duty to my child if I fought against her now."

He walked slowly to the door, opened it, and without another word Barnett followed him out. Five minutes later the latch of the gate was heard to click, and as all stood listening, James Ellis came in and uttered a sigh of relief. There was that in his face which made Mary, with her eyes bright and a flush upon her cheeks such as had not been seen there for a year, run to

him and fling her arms about his neck, as she went into a wild fit of joyful hysterical sobbing, which it was long before she could control.

There was not much to tell, but it was to the following effect. It dated from the evening when he had been left busying himself in the garden of old Tummus's cottage, left entirely to himself, trimming up the roses, and thinking sadly that there was no future for him in the world.

This had been going on for some time, and he was busily feeling the prickly rose strands, and taking nails and shreds from his pocket to tack the wild, blossoming shoots neatly in their places, in perfect ignorance, after a while, that he was being watched. For, though he heard hoofs upon the hard green turf beside the road, he supposed the sounds to be made by some horse returning to its stables from its pasture on the common, and did not imagine that it was mounted, as he heard it stop, and begin cropping the young shoots upon the garden hedge.

"Good-evening," said a decisive voice suddenly, speaking as if it was a good evening, and he who spoke would like to hear any one contradict him.

"Good-evening, sir," replied John Grange, adding the "sir," for the voice seemed familiar, and he knew the speaker was riding.

"You remember me, eh?"

There was a slight twitching about the muscles of John Grange's forehead as he craned his neck towards the speaker, and then he seemed to draw back, as he said sadly—

"No, sir; I seem to remember your voice, but I am blind."

"Quite blind?"

"Yes, sir."

"Look in my direction—hard, and now tell me: can you not make out my face, even faintly?"

"I can see that there is light, sir, where you are; but you have your back to the west. It is the warm sunset."

"Then you are not quite blind, my lad. Well, has Mrs Mostyn forgiven you about her orchids?"

"Ah! I remember you now, sir," cried Grange. "You are the friend—the great doctor—who came to see them."

"To be sure I am the doctor—I don't know about great—who stayed the night—Doctor Renton, of the Gables, Dale-by-Lyndon."

"Yes, sir, I know. I have heard tell of your beautiful garden."

"Indeed? Well, look here, my man. Your mistress interested me in your case, and I thought I would ride over some evening and see you. I should like you to come to me, so that I could examine your eyes, and test them a little."

John Grange turned ghastly and fell a-trembling, as he grasped at the window-sill to steady himself.

"Come, come, that will not do," cried the doctor quickly. "Be a man! You are weak and nervous. Try and control your feelings."

"But—then— oh, for Heaven's sake, speak, sir," said Grange, in a husky whisper. "You think there is hope?"

"I do not say that, my man, but since Mrs Mostyn told me about your case, I have thought of it a great deal. Come over and see me, saying nothing to any one, for fear of disappointment. Then, if I think it is worth while, you shall come up to London and stay."

"It is too much to bear," groaned the sufferer.

"No: and you will bear it. But you must expect nothing. I shall in all probability fail, but if I do, you will be no worse off than you are now."

"No, sir, I could be no worse off," faltered Grange.

"That is the way to take it. Then you will come? But I must warn you: it may mean your being away for a year—perhaps for two."

"I would do anything to get back my sight."

"Then you will come? I will not communicate with Mrs Mostyn, for fear of raising false hopes. If I succeed she will forgive your sudden leaving. She is a good mistress, my lad. Pity you did not speak out the truth that day."

John Grange flushed up.

"Indeed it was the truth, sir," he cried angrily.

"There, there! No excitement. You will have to lead now a calm, unemotional life if I am to do you good. Good-evening. I shall expect to see you to-morrow morning, then, before I leave for town. But once more, keep your own counsel, and hope for nothing; then all that comes will be so much gain."

He drew up the rein, touched his horse's side, and went off at a canter, leaving Grange standing in the cottage garden, one moment with his mind illumined by hope, the next black with despair.

"No," he cried softly; "it is too late. He can do nothing. Only that long, dark journey before me to the end. Tell no one! Lead no one to expect that I may be cured! No, not a word to any. Better away from here to be forgotten, for everything about me grows too hard to bear."

That night he stole away in the darkness, to pause on the opposite side of the road, to whisper to the winds good-bye, and feel for a few brief minutes that he was near Mary before he said "Good-bye—for ever!" To be dead to all he knew unless he could return to them as he had been of old.

This was John Grange's story—condensed—as he told it to the group at the cottage. Then in a low, deep tone, full of emotion—

"If I was to end my days sightless, Mary, I knew I could not come to you again; but Heaven has willed it otherwise. It has been a long, long waiting, hopeless till within the last month, and it was only within the past few days that the doctor told me that all was safe, and I might be at rest."

"But you might have written, John, if only once," said Mrs Ellis, with a sob in her throat.

"Yes," he said, "I might, but I believe what I did was right, Mrs Ellis; forgive me, all of you, if I was wrong."

What followed? Mrs Mostyn was eager to see John Grange back in his old position, but he gravely shook his head.

"No," he said, "Mary, I am not going to trample on a man who is down. Let Dan Barnett keep the place; the doctor offers me one that will make us a happy home; and it will be, will it not?"

Mary glanced at her mother before replying, and James Ellis clasped the young man's hand, while Mrs Ellis rushed out to have what she called a good hearty cry.

"Lor', missus," said old Tummus, "I never worried much about it. There's a deal of trouble in this here life, but a lot o' joy as well: things generally comes right in the end."

"Not always, dear."

"Eh? Well, never mind, this one has; and I only wish I was a bit younger, so that I could go and be under Muster John Grange.— No, I couldn't. I can go and see 'em once in a way, but I must stop here, in this old garden, with the missus, until we die."

"Yes, Tummus, yes," said old Hannah. "It wouldn't do at our time o' life to make a change."

"Only that last big one, old lady, to go and work in the Master's vineyard, if He sees as we've done right. But there, dear, on'y to think o' all this here trouble coming from sawing off a bit o' ragged wood."

The End.
